fantastic

THE FINEST OF FANTASY FICTION

Walter M. Miller, Jr.

William P. McGivern

Robert Sheckley

Ralph Robin

MOTHER BY PROTEST

By Richard Matheson

A Science-Fiction Thriller

35¢

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1953

A ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLICATION

A PORTFOLIO by Gustav Rehberger

THEY WRITE...

RAY HOULIHAN

"Have been drawing since earliest recollection. I was born in Worcester, Mass. 29 years ago, migrating to New York in 1946, after serving three years in the Army. During this period I've done about everything: comics, gag cartoons, and even a newspaper feature page. For the past four years I've been doing story illustrations for various magazines including *Bluebook*, *Saga*, *Coronet*, and *Pageant*."

PHILIP K. DICK

"Appeared on terra just twenty-three years ago, in Chicago, Ill. Very cold, rainy day. Moved quickly to Berkeley, California to get back in the sun. Grew up slowly over the years, listening to Bach, reading dusty second hand fantasy magazines, writing little sinister stories. Married a girl anthropology student from the University and bought a house and a cat. Have finally arrived as a writer. Droves of small boys, all *aficionados* of science-fiction, greet me on the street. Ah, Fame!"

GUSTAV REHBERGER

"I was born in Austria, came to this country and settled in Chicago. My art studies began at the Art Institute of Chicago. I enjoy working in different styles—in design as well as illustration, and in fine arts, too. Recently I won the Seventh Annual Audubon Exhibition for the most creative painting."

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WOLF PACK

By WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

Maybe you've always thought of war as a business for the tough and the unimaginative. It has been said that the best soldier leaves his emotions at home; that pre-battle training is a period calculated to harden both mind and body. But what of the boy who cannot harden? What of the lad who cannot put his sensitivity in a suitcase and store it for the duration? Walter Miller tells us.

HE GASPED and sat up, spilling blankets from sleep-hot shoulders. He shivered a moment in darkness, shaking his head in his hands. Bixby snored faintly on the other cot. Engines were coughing to life on the flight-line as the ground crews pre-flighted the waiting ships. The breath of morning came icy through the tent-flaps to shock him into full wakefulness.

He glanced at the luminous flare of his watch dial. It was nearly killing time.

He swung his legs out of bed, felt the gritty earth under his bare feet, groped under the cot for fleece-lined boots. He lit a cigaret, then a candle, stared at Bixby for

a moment. Bixby's mouth was working and a sliver of drool lay over his chin.

Mark Kessel hauled his lanky frame to its feet, and stepped over to Bixby's bunk. He lifted one end of the cot two feet from the floor and dropped it hard. Then he went outside to finish dressing in the olive grove while Bixby sputtered and fought the bed clothes.

Dew was in the olive trees, and it glistened faintly in the dim light from other tents in the grove where men grumbled before the dawn and crawled into coveralls and flight jackets, stuffed candy bars and bail-out kits in their knee-pockets, buckled low-slung forty-fives about their waists, tucked a scented letter inside their shirts, and stalked away with a lazy slouch to fly and kill in the dawn.

"I've got a feeling," came Bixby's muffled voice from the tent.

"Yeah?" Mark grunted, not wanting to talk. He dumped frigid water from a jerry-can into a steel helmet and began sloshing his face and head.

"This one'll be a bitch," said Bixby.

"Maybe."

"This your forty-sixth, Mark, or seventh?"

Mark Kessel glowered for a moment into darkness. "Dry up, will you Bix? I don't feel like gab."

"Hung over?"

"Uh-uh."

"Dreams again, huh? About the dame."

"Just dry up."

"Okay, Skipper. Sorry."

A stupid mistake, he decided, telling Bix about the dreams and about La. A drunkenly stupid mistake. Bix made noises like a green flight surgeon with delusions of psychiatry, and, having memorized the symptoms of flight fatigue, was always ready to gig a fellow fly-boy with a diagnosis, prognosis, or post mortem. And he couldn't understand about La.

An orderly room corporal came prowling through the grove, splashing a flashlight's beam among the trees and bellowing. "All bombardier-navigators, report immediately to briefing. All bombigators, early briefing."

A tent flap parted, revealing a slit of light with a head in it. "Hey, Corp!" It called. "What's the target?"

"Not sure, Lieutenant. Heard it's Perugia."

Listening, Mark Kessel froze, his face dripping into a towel.

"Hell, we just hit Prujie last week," growled the head.

"Zat so?" answered the corporal indifferently. "All bombigators, report immediately to briefing! All bombigators . . ." The corporal wandered on.

Mark stood rocking slightly, towel halfway to his face, remem-

bering Perugia. He heard Bix coming outside, and began drying himself.

"He say Perugia?" Bix grunted.

"Yeah."

"Told you this one'll be a bitch."

"Yeah."

"Well, Pappy, he was yelling at me. See you later."

"Yeah. Take it easy."

Bix shuffled away toward the orderly room, unzipped boots making cocky flapping sounds about his ankles. Mark sighed and went back into the tent to stretch out on his cot and think. A preliminary bombardier's briefing meant that he had a half hour or so before pilots and enlisted crews were called. The group had done a lousy job on Perugia last week, and the colonel probably meant to rumble about it to the men who manned the bomb sights. It was decreed that the city should die.

Mark lay blowing slow smoke at the candle-flame and wondered what the hell had happened to him in eight months of war. Once he was sick when he saw the long hungry strip of bomb-bursts trace a belt of billowing death across a small Italian village. Once he howled in the cockpit when a flitting Focke-Wulf slashed in-and-down from five o'clock high, leaving the plexiglass turret of his wing-ship coated crimson from inside. The turret was partially shattered, and the slipstream dried the crimson to ugly brown and flaked it away before wheels touched home ground.

Now he felt nothing. I am a machine, he thought. Or a part of a machine. A machine with five human parts geared in with the aluminum, glass, and steel. They screw us into our places and we function like pistons, or cogs, or vacuum tubes. We, who were five, become one, and that beats hell out of the Trinity.

Listen, Kessel, he told himself, you're getting to be a sad sack of cemented *merde*. You got four missions to go and they send you home. Why bitch about it now?

But he closed his eyes and watched a mental bomb-pattern trace a mental stripe of hell across a small mental village, and it all looked quietly familiar and unfrightening to him. He dived down through billowing dust to peer at crushed things lying in the rubble, and still he felt nothing.

Mark Kessel stubbed out his cigaret in the dirt floor of the tent and asked himself almost indifferently what had happened to his soul? Or whatever it was.

He stared at the candlelight flickering on the canvas canopy above him and struggled to feel something besides emptiness.

He thought of La. She brought a faint tickling to his scalp and a pleasant pulsing of the temples. For a long time he lay basking in

the warmth of La. She was sleeping. She lay curled in a featherbed, dark hair tangled across an oversized pillow, lips parted, an arm under her head. He scented the faint musky warmth about her, watched her lazy breathing, noted the paleness of a shaven armpit. She stirred in her sleep and smiled faintly She was dreaming of him. He slipped quietly into her dream, and they wandered along a sunny lake shore, watching the ducks skimming low over water that scintillated in the breeze.

"Will they read the banns tomorrow?" she whispered.

"Tomorrow at every Mass."

Mark shook his head and sat up. There was paper in his valpack at the end of the cot. He dragged it out and lay on his side to write with the stationery box on the edge of the cot. He usually wrote her a letter before a mission, if there were time enough.

He told her about his crew, and about Lecce and San Pancrazio and the way the old Italian women came to catch lizards and snails in the vineyard and cooked them over charcoal fires along rubbled streets in the village. He told her about the olive grove and the vineyards and the donkey carts painted in carnival colors, and about how he had tasted a donkey steak in a San Pancrazio cafe. He told her about the little girl with the festering shrapnel wound, and the bullet-pocked walls of once-fascist buildings whose megalomanic inscriptions in praise of *Italia* and *Giovannezza* had been daubed over with red paint and obscenity. And . . .

Listen, Babe, this one's got me down. I haven't talked about such stuff before, but this time's different. I'm scared as hell. This mission gives me the shakes. Maybe it's only because I'm nearly finished with my tour. Maybe it's because I'm about ready to go back. But it's more like being scared for you, baby, not for myself. I felt like this the last time we hit this target.

The words surprised him. He had felt no conscious fear, but as words poured forth, he knew that fear was there.

I love you, La.

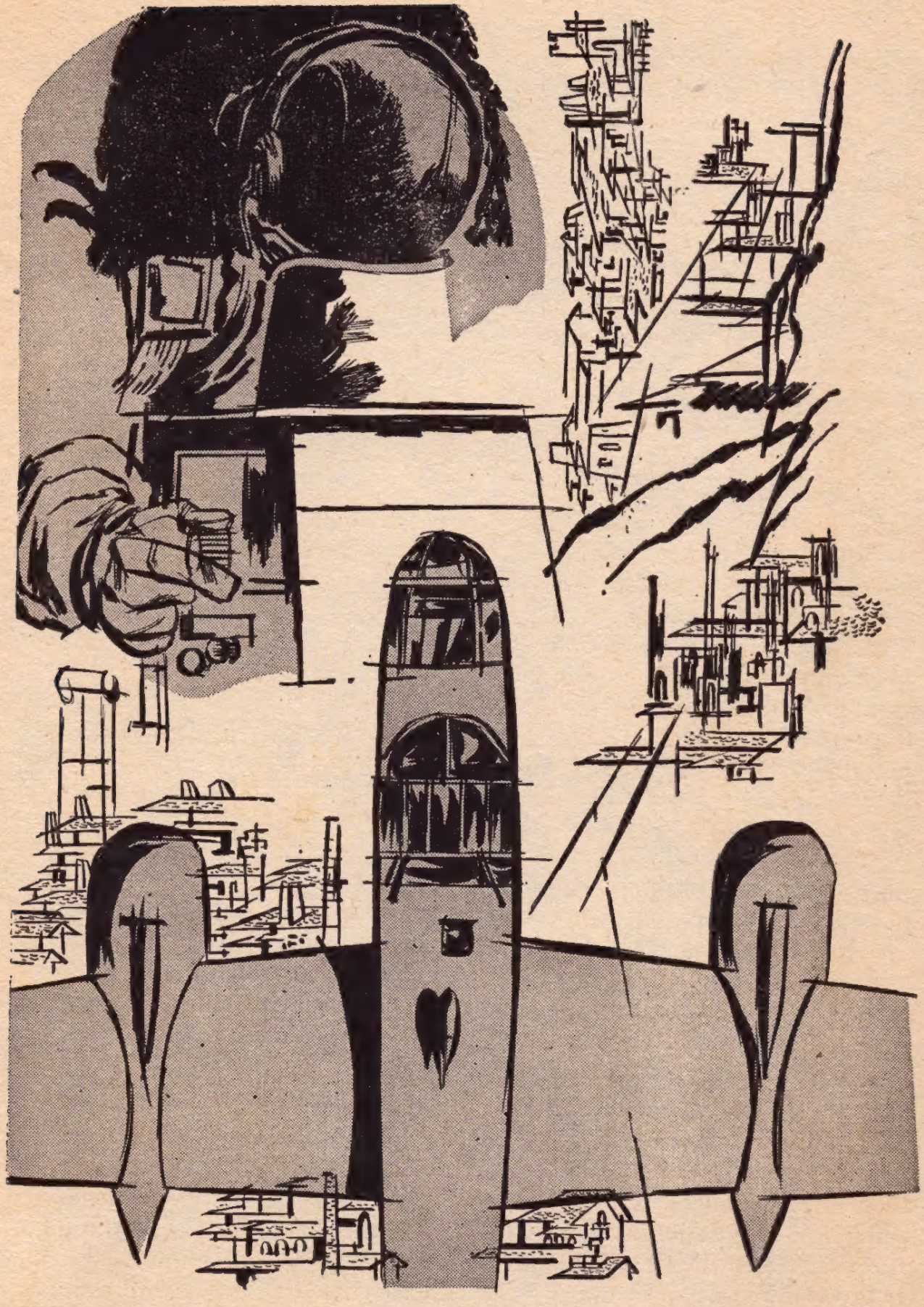
He stared at the letter for a time, then held it toward the candle-flame, watched soot collect on its underside, watched a charred spot appear, crack, and catch fire.

The last ashes were fluttering to the floor when the tent-flaps slapped apart and a bulldog face thrust itself inside.

"Whatthehell, Kessel, you think we oughta hold the goddam war up for you? Get your lazy butt out to the truck!"

"Sorry, Major. I didn't hear the call."

Major Gladin's hammy face put on a fanged smirk. "Well you got my personal invitation now, Lieutenant. Shall I send a staff car for



you, Lieutenant, or can you walk."

Kessel reddened and rolled off the bunk. Major Gladin stalked away, mumbling about the "fifty-mission heebies" and temperamental goddam airplane jockeys who needed wet nurses.

He scraped the ashes of the letter into the dirt with his foot. Maybe you'll know I wrote it anyhow, Babe. Maybe you'll get it somehow, even if I don't know just where to mail it.

A brisk dawn wind had risen, and clouds gathered in a gory dawn. A pair of Limey trucks hauled the flight-crews of the 489th Squadron from the tent area along the winding bumpy road to the old barracks that served as a briefing room. Narrowed eyes watered in the wind, and men sandwiched their chapped faces between the fleece-skin lapels of their jackets. Men huddled behind the cabs of the trucks, trading occasional insults, or smoking in silence while hair whipped about their eyes and foreheads.

Mark Kessel listened to the briefing officer with half an ear. Much was routine, and much was of interest chiefly to the squadron leaders and lead-bombardiers. Wing-men hugged the formation and followed the lead ship. Wing bombardiers toggled off the five hundred pounders upon signal from the goose at the head of the vee. He listened with interest to weather data, flak and fighter reports, and information on the target.

Perugia was a bulge in an artery that fed the *Wehrmacht* fist. They wanted the arteries burst and bled. They wanted a tourniquet around Italy, a tourniquet to numb the South and enfeeble it. They wanted an amputation.

"The marshalling yards are the principal target," the colonel called curtly, "but stretch the pattern over the town. Give Jerry something to do, shovelling rubble. Any questions?"

You take five hundred pounds of TNT, thought Kessel, and you dump it on a plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal footwarmers and coral virgins looking down from wall niches, a house with photographs of Babe Ruth and Primo Carnera flanking an eighteenth century crucifix, a house that had seen ten generations of human birth and growth and love and death, a house with antipasto furnishings and oil-and-vinegar atmosphere and girl-at-the-piano warmth about the living room. A house rich with the odor of blood-red wine and moon-pale cheese, with the savor of garlic and anisette, with the aroma of healthy perspiring women, and on Holy Days, the smell of candle-flames, mingled with baking cakes. You bombed it, you clobbered it, you reduced it, you shattered and

wrecked and crumbled it into a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth caught between the stones fluttered in a dusty breeze. You took the house and kicked it apart into the street so that Jerry would have to spend his time and his bulldozers clearing it out of the way. You never see the house, or the dozens of others like it. You only know it's there somewhere in the ugly belt of dust and belching hell ten thousand feet beneath you, but not seeing it, you feel only a puzzled concern.

There were no questions.

Men in fleece-skins and parachute harnesses slouched out of the briefing room and milled toward the squadron trucks. There was no laughter. Quietly, around the corner of the building, a gunner knelt for a chaplain's blessing, and quickly strode away. Trucks grumbled away, nosed onto a taxi-strip, headed for the aircraft dispersal area.

Mark Kessel stared at the eagles crouched in the olive grove and thought about La. The eagles' wing racks were loaded with bombs and their bellies were full of thunder. La was combing her hair and smiling softly at her thoughts. She was thinking of a dream. She crossed her legs, and the satin robe fell from her thighs as she sat before the vanity. Brown and slender, and a muscle twitched as she absently swung a foot and laughed softly to herself.

He caught her shoulders gently, and she came up to him with a low purr of pleasure. Her bosom snuggled close and her shoulders hunched forward against him.

"O Marco! Che bello questo momento!" she murmured.

Mark chuckled at his own inventions. He had not seen an English-speaking woman in so long that even the image of La spoke Italian.

The dun-colored eagles looked hungry on their concrete emplacements. There is something anxious and eager in the three-legged stance of a B-25, with its blunt and squarish features and the gull-like set of its wings. They're more alive than most aircraft, he thought, and full of a childlike enthusiasm. They performed their tasks with innocence.

There were certain advantages to being a machine, he thought. Certain comforts in mindlessness and guiltlessness. The light of dawn was red on their wings and flaring on their plexiglass blisters.

"Hell, Kessel!" barked a voice. "Wake up! Shake it, will ya?"

He came out of a daze, glanced around, saw the rest of his crew already out of the parked truck and walking toward the ship. Bixby grinned back at him over his shoulder.

"Come on Pappy! We need a driver."

He growled something sour at the men remaining in the truck, vaulted over the tail-gate, and sauntered after his crew. The truck lumbered on, delivering parcels of men at each parking station. He checked over the crew chief's report, signed the slip, listened to the crew chief's usual straight faced remark:

"Perugia, huh? Milk-run again, eh, Pappy?"

"Sure. Care to come along for the ride?"

"Guess not. Think I'll go to town for a little excitement."

"Take off."

They parted still wearing straight faces.

The turret gunner and the radio op were already crawling into the rear hatch. Mark turned for a moment to glance over the ship with its "Prince Albert" sign on the nose. It had acquired its name when a North African ground crew had used a tobacco can to patch a bullet hole in the fuselage. The ship was scarred and decrepit, but he knew every inch of it, and he suspected that it would fall to pieces in other hands than the knowing ones of its present ground and flight crews. He loved the old rattling wreck. Almost the way he loved La.

"Damn it to hell, Pappy!" called Surges, his copilot. "Do we fly today, or don't we?"

"Keep your war-drawers on, Junior Birdman. Pappy's comin'."

He hiked toward the forward hatch, and moments later inverters whined in the cockpit. Engines coughed to life.

"Interphone check. Bixby?"

"Loud and clear, Pappy," answered the voice in his headsets.

"Radio?"

"Burnes, loud and clear."

"Turret?"

"Sparley, ditto, Pappy."

"Tail?"

"Winters, okay, sir."

"The class is now in session. Be seated, gentlemen."

Preliminary patter brought a sense of oneness somehow, like a man prodding himself to make sure he was still in one piece. Mark lost his black mood as he taxied the Prince from the revetment and into line on the strip. There was thunder of engines in the morning, and the trees whipped in the prop-wash at every turning. The eagles lumbered single-file to the end of the runway. The eagles took off in pairs, wheels folding gracefully, almost daintily, as they roared aloft and circled for assembly in the sky. Twenty-seven ships gleamed golden in the early sun. A flying wolf pack that rallied by twos and formed in flights of three, three flights in echelon, three squadrons in a staggered vee.

The wolf pack turned east toward the open sea, and the Adriatic fluttered with blinding gold

in the direction of a blazing sun.

Mark Kessel felt Surges watching him occasionally, gave him a questioning glance. Surges was a dark little man with a sour smirk and a quick nervousness that made Mark wonder sometimes why they'd packed him in a twenty-five instead of a Mustang or a Thunderbolt.

"Feeling better, Pappy?" Surges asked over the interphone.

"Better than what?" grunted the pilot.

"Don't hand me that horse-manure, Skipper. I can read you like a tech order."

"Then read and shut up. There's a war on, you know."

"And if I may echo the immortal words of Sherman, war is a crock of crap."

The formation thundered northwestward along the broad blue tongue of the Adriatic. Kessel's crew fell silent, each of them aware of the other's presence and functions, each filling his place in the total Mechanthrope. War, thought Mark, was paradoxical proof that men by nature are cooperative social beings, functioning best as teams. Unfortunately, teams were not necessarily cooperative with other teams.

Hearken to the wisdom of a washed out flak dodger, he mused sourly. Once, when he was a sophomore math and philosophy student, he could tolerate his own solemn intellectualizings. Now, when they happened accidentally, he felt the need to boil himself in sarcasm and forget it. Nothing seemed sillier than searching for subtle meanings when the only meaning left in life was how to stay alive. He needed no rationalizations about his reasons for being where he was and what he was. Idealism was for the crumbs who never got there. He liked to fly, and he liked to play the game, and if the rules were dirty, then it would be more embarrassing to refuse to fight than it was to play the rotten game. People were proud of him for playing it, and he was glad they were proud, for no reason other than that it felt good.

He grinned acidly at Surges. "Hey, Surgie. I just realized that we are the 'Mothers'-Sons-Who-Fought-and-Bled' that they talk about on the Fourth."

"Jeez, whattay know!" Surges mused for a moment. "Say, you thinking about doing another tour?"

Mark spat an obscenity.

"I know," said Surges. "You're feeling guilty about not bleeding."

"True, possibly true."

"A small scar would probably help."

"Help what?"

"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of women. You could always show her your scar as a way of breaking the ice."

"Not necessary. No ice . . ."

Around La, he finished under his breath, and fell silent again. Gloomily silent. Maybe I'm really getting psycho, he considered, realizing how much he believed in La. How could he explain about La to somebody like Bixby or Surges? *There was this dame, see, and her name was Ruth, and she came from Seattle, and she was blonde, pale-eyed, and creamy, see? And she's waiting for me, but it's no damn good any more, because I can't see her. I see only La, and La is a ghost, a figment, a myth made by a haunted spirit.*

She had grown like a strange moth in the chrysalis of his mind, born of a slow metamorphosis that began with a memory image of Ruth. The metamorphosis had changed a pleasant, comfortable, homey sort of a girl into a sleek, intense, moody creature of tender passion, whom he called "La" or "La Femme" because he knew she was no longer Ruth. But who was this wraith who came to him across the frozen tundra of his psyche?

Don't kid yourself, fly-boy, it's happened to other guys. Idealization, they call it. You revise Ruth because you're not quite satisfied with the way she is. You substitute the thing you want for the thing that's true, and if you didn't have a pocketful of pictures for reference, you'd think your La was Ruth, you stupid ape. Guys have thought it before, and it's a helluva shock, they say, to bump buck teeth with the girl you remembered as a delectable siren instead of a toothy frump. La is an idealized Ruth, and a part of you damn well knows it.

But he couldn't sell himself. It hurt. There was a La somewhere, and he had to believe in her. He groped for ways to support the belief: telepathy — or a chance meeting that lingered in unconscious memory without details of time and place. She came to him in dreams with such clarity that he was frequently certain that somewhere he had seen her. Perhaps one of those brief meetings at some moronic party where two people meet and chat and sense some strong attraction between them, but never manage to get beyond the usual polite inanities because of surging friends with cocktail glasses and the restrained sub-note of hysteria that pervades a roomful of yammering humanity which is having a lousy time but pretending to enjoy itself. So maybe he met La that way, and she haunted him.

She was a physical touch in the night, a whispered voice in lonely moments. He knew her moods, her weaknesses, her strengths. They fitted his own, and the two halves dovetailed into one flesh, one spirit. There was a lock, and a key to fit it — a sword, and a

sheath to match. There were two clocks, running back to back, keeping the same time by heartbeat pendulums. But she was lonesome and frightened, and he knew not why.

The fighters came sidling in out of the hot blue sky, friendly killers that met the wolf pack off the coast near Bari to escort it northward for the strike. A Lockheed Lightning slipped in close to Kessel's flight, throttled back, waggled its wings. Kessel exchanged a thumbs-up with the fighter jockey, then watched the haughty killer flip away and climb to fly far out at nine-o'clock-high, guarding the pack against steel-beaked falcons of the Luftwaffe.

The sun poured into the cockpit and warmed it. The sun washed the coastline far off to the left below. The sun baked the dun-colored ships and made the formation a thing of beauty against the Mediterranean blue. Sky and sea were full of turquoise peace that made the waiting violence seem unreal, a battle-game played under the auspices of a jovial Wotan who saw that killing was not for keeps.

Kessel gave the controls to Surges while he lit a cigaret and settled back to relax for awhile. He stared down at the lace-fringed sea where triremes had sailed and Caesar's ships had sped toward other wars. It was the same. Add wings and replace the slaves with 1750 horsepower radial engines, and the catapults with demolition bombs. It was always the same. It was destructive, but because it was patterned and planned, because it was systematized and rhythmic, because it was dynamic and flowing toward a goal, it was somehow creative through its functioning. Through crucifixion came redemption; through war, new pattern and synthesis.

"*Pilot to crew*," he called over the interphone. "*We're coming onto posted property. Better test your guns.*"

La would not like what he was feeling now, he thought. She hated the whole bloody mess, and would be unable to understand his own mixed feelings and ambivalences. Look through my eyes, my La. See what I am seeing and feel my feelings while I am a part of this Mechanthrope. For here we fail to fit, and though here be difference between us, so must there be understanding. Look with my eyes! See the sleek wolf pack running across cold sky, feel the icy air that leaks in around my feet, and the warm sun on the slippery leather of my jacket. Look north to the clear horizon where death will soon meet death and a city shall be consumed. Know that we in the pack must move and live as brothers, even though we must kill our brothers down below, whom

we will never see — never know.

Do you feel me, La? For I know that you are sitting on a stone bench beneath a trellis with a book in your lap, gazing dreamily out toward the lake where we walk in the breeze by night. A small child plays at your feet, and he is your cousin.

But it was no good. He could never seem to drag her to him while he flew. It was as if she resisted knowing what he was and what he did.

The ship's guns burped above the thunder of the engines as Burnes, Bixby, Sparley, and Winters each rattled off a few rounds from the fifty calibre guns in their respective positions. Mark nosed the ship down slightly and squeezed the firing stud for the fixed noseguns. A belch shuddered up through the cockpit, and a momentary haze flickered up across the plexiglass, and four streaks of tracers squirted out ahead to vanish toward the ocean. Other ships were doing the same. A flexing of the muscles before the brawl.

If only the target were not Perugia! Perhaps it was the length of the mission and the time over enemy territory that made him uneasy, but Sofia and Ploeste were even farther and they gave him no such discomfort. He had a quick knotting of his belly with the bombing of Perugia, and there was no logic in it. Maybe it was something about the countryside that stirred some old memory of home, but it was as if the reproving eyes of monks and urchins and old women were upon him, as if hatred were a palpable thing, radiating up from the land below. As if the Christ that was suffused in the flesh of Italian masses called softly in rebuke to the wolf pack.

O my people, what have I done to thee?
In what have I grieved thee?
Answer me,
For I gave thee a royal sceptre,
And thou hast given to me a scourge.

"Hey, Pappy, this is Bix," croaked his headsets.

"Yeah?"

"Look at the coastline — up about eleven o'clock low. See those specks?"

Mark leaned close to the window and stared down for a few seconds. Three gnats were flitting out across the water, close to the drink. "Fighters," he answered absently.

"Maybe our own, boss."

"Maybe. . . . Pilot to crew, you get that?"

They answered in turn that they got it.

"Burnes, you keep your eyes on them. The rest of you keep looking around."

He switched his jackbox to command radio and called the escort craft. "Hello Jackknife,

this is Eggbeater. Sharks at curfew time below. Over."

"Roger, Eggbeater. Out," came the reply.

But the fighters remained close to the formation, except for two that broke away and began climbing instead of diving. Mark watched them for a moment, then called the crew again.

"Everybody but Burnes — keep an eye out above. Those may be decoys down below. Don't get caught with your pants down if a bunch of pigeons come out of the sun."

"Say, Pappy," Burnes called five minutes later. "I think those are P-47s. They're heading on south."

"Roger, but watch it. Jerry knows we're coming."

The wolf pack came to Fermo and turned inland, feinting toward Terni. Over the coast, hell broke. The first black blossom of flak opened suddenly inside the formation, blotting Mark's view of the 487th Squadron for an instant, then dropping behind. The wolf pack spread quickly apart, the ships weaving and swaying evasively while they kept the general shape of the formation. The inky flak-bursts followed the pack, and Mark felt an occasional *thud* shiver the ship from a close burst. The death-blossoms trailed behind as they drove inland, and a few miles from the coast the blossoms were gone.

Ahead lay the snow-blanketed slopes of the Apennines with villages like eagles' nests on their sides. Mark stared down at the land. "Enemy," he told himself. If you had to bail out, these hillbillies would gut you and flay you and hang you by the heels in the market place. But you couldn't hate them for that. You could only figure that maybe you deserved it.

Cut the horse manure, fly-boy. This is business, and it's during office hours. That's the turning point up there, and there's hell beyond the mountains.

"BANDITS AT SEVEN O'CLOCK HIGH!" howled a sudden voice in the intercomm.

And an instant later, Sparley loosed a three second burst from the upper turret. Burnes got a burst from the waist, and then Mark saw the Focke-Wulf zipping down and turning sharply into a dive at about eight hundred yards, while two P-38s stabbed toward it. Another Focke-Wulf crossed like a flash in a pursuit curve aimed at the squadron just ahead and above. Bixby slashed at it with the flexible nose-gun, as it cut back and under, out of sight.

The interphone was yammering as Mark's crew stabbed out at the flitting falcons. He saw a plume of smoke trailing earthward about two miles away, but the range was too great to recognize it as friend or foe. One ship in the lead flight had a slightly chewed up

tail, but no ships dropped out of the pack.

Flak began bursting around the ship when they were still five minutes from target, and six Messerschmitts whipped out of the sun, screaming in slashing arcs across the rear of the formation. One went down, but a twenty-five began trailing smoke, fell from formation, one wing blazing. White silk puffs flowered beneath it. It fell into the blazing wing and spun earthward. The black death-flowers rocked the ship with their blooming, and Mark Kessel's nostrils quivered at the scent of cordite as the Prince ploughed through the smoke-balls of a steady barrage. The wolf pack waved and dodged. The wolf pack tumbled across the sky in seeming consternation, but the pattern lingered as in a frightened flock of geese. Ahead lay the city, and beyond it the marshalling yards, the arterial bulge in the long flow to the south. It was wide and hard to miss. And beyond the marshalling yards — the broad blue waters of Lake Trasimeno.

The lake, it reminded him of La. His scalp crawled, and his hands were fists on the controls. Surges sat smiling sourly at the flak bursts, chin propped on one elbow, smoking a lazy cigaret. Mark glared at him and cursed under his breath. Voices were tense on the interphone.

"Bandit, four o'clock low — no, it's a Spitfire. One of ours."

"Hey! Flak heavy at one o'clock low, Pappy."

"Get a burst on this Focke-Wulf, Burnes."

"Goddam it, bomb bays open! The stupid bastard, he'll make this a long one!"

"*Rake him! Rake hell out of him!*"

"Bomb bays open, Pappy."

"Straight and level."

"Lead man's bucking for a Purple Heart."

"Shut up and watch your business!"

"Blow it, Pappy."

"Damn! Surges! Take it!"

"What's wrong, Pappy?"

"Just take it and shut up!"

Surges gave him a look and grabbed the controls. The wolf pack had plunged from fifteen to nine-thousand feet, and whipped toward the target with the instruments hugging the red-line. The crack of a bull-whip snapped through the ship as a shard of shrapnel stung the fuselage.

"That one bite anybody?" Surges called.

"Nope, nope. Goddam, get it over with!"

Mark Kessel sat panting, fists clenched and pressed together. She was with him now, for the first time she was with him, and her meanings, if not her voice came to him like a savage song:

"*Che brutto!* . . . How hateful you are. I hate you hate you hate

you hate you! You goddam murderer, you killed my mother! You wrecked my church, and you shattered my city, and now you come again! They'll get you, they'll rake you and rip you and slash you to ribbons. You gutless apes! *Che brutto!*"

She stood under the trellis with her fists clenched, her hair in the wind, ignoring the black hell in the sky that rained spent shrapnel over the city. Her breasts were sharp and proud and heaving. Her face was flushed with fury. Nearby, a frightened child was wailing.

He saw her, and she was with him like a scourge, and she knew that it was he. He swallowed a sick place in his throat and grabbed for his throat mic switch.

"Bixby! Close the bomb bays!"

"What's that, Pappy."

"Close 'em, goddam you!"

"Pappy, you're out of your head."

Mark cursed and grabbed for the salvo lever. Surges knocked his arm aside and slapped him hard across the mouth.

"Pappy! Get the hell out of here. You're blowing your top!"

Mark doubled his fist and drove it hard against the copilot's cheekbone. The ship fell out of formation as Surges dropped both hands from the controls and shook his head dizzily. Mark swung again, but Surges caught it on his shoulder.

Suddenly the muzzle of a forty-five jammed his ribs, and Surges hissed, "Damn you, Pappy, I'll blow your guts halfway to Naples. Sit still, or I'll kill you. We've got six men aboard."

He swung again. Surges let the ship go, jammed a foot against Mark's side, pistol-whipped him until the pilot fell bleeding against the side of his seat.

La, La! his mind whimpered.

The only answer was a tempest of hatred that engulfed him.

La, I couldn't know!

But he *could* have known. He had flown this mission before. He knew about the lake, and it was the same lake. He knew about her language and her mannerisms. He knew down deep — who she was, and where she was, and what she was.

Then he heard Bixby howl "*Finally!*" as the lead ship began toggling its bombs. One . . . two . . . three . . . and the Prince lost weight in gulps of five hundred pounds. He felt them leave the ship, and he wanted to dive after them. Looking back, he saw that the radio op had crawled atop the bomb bays for a sneak look through the hatch at the plummetting projectiles. The man was grinning. "*Bombs away!*" and the formation banked sharply.

I'll beat Burnes till his face is pulp, he thought. But *La* called out, *It's you, it's you, Marco, you foul coward.*

I'm not after your city, La! It's Jerry we're trying to kill! I can't help it, none of us can help it! For God's sake, La. For God's sake!

Yes, Marco, for God's sake.

He kept staring back at the city, waiting for the hell to break. Twenty four seconds after bombs-away, it broke. Thunder walked across the city and over the marshalling yards. Hell plumed up from a festered wound of five and belching dust.

La — La with your wind tossed hair and slender moon-blessed face, with your grace and your love and your laughter. La — La, in your plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal foot-warmers and coral virgins that look down from wall niches, a house of human birth and growth and death. La — La — it was us. I'm sorry. If I'd known. . . . He choked off, feeling the grinding pain.

If you had known, came a feeble whisper, *would all be spared for the sake of one?*

It stabbed him in a clenched belly, and it was mockery. He spat a shard of broken tooth from Surges' pistol-work, and he was sick. Because her question was demanded of a god.

No, Marco, only of men.

And the flak trailed away behind them, as did the last whisper of her consciousness.

He crawled out of the cockpit and lay on the floor just forward of the bomb bays. He lay choking and panting and spitting blood. There was a black fog, full of fractured steel and bright red death that throbbed within it. There was fear, and the face of a woman. He was priest at a screaming ritual, and the dull blade bit a blue-fringed wound.

There was a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth was caught between broken stones, and a shattered wall where once had been a garden and a trellis. It was finished now, all finished.

"You can relax, Pappy, you're okay now."

"Man you're lucky, Pappy! They'll send you home right away. Hell, no need to finish those last four missions."

"Combat fatigue? Hell, Pappy, it could happen to anybody."

He was in the hospital. He sat up and looked around. There was Burnes, and Surges — hanging back — and Winters, and Bix, and Sparley. He shook his head and tried to remember.

La was gone. And her absence was sufficient proof that she had been there.

"It was a good strike, Pappy. We clobbered half the town."

He wanted to order them out. He got them out as quick as he could, but loneliness was no better. Why did it have to be La? And something answered: "Would you spare them all for the one?"

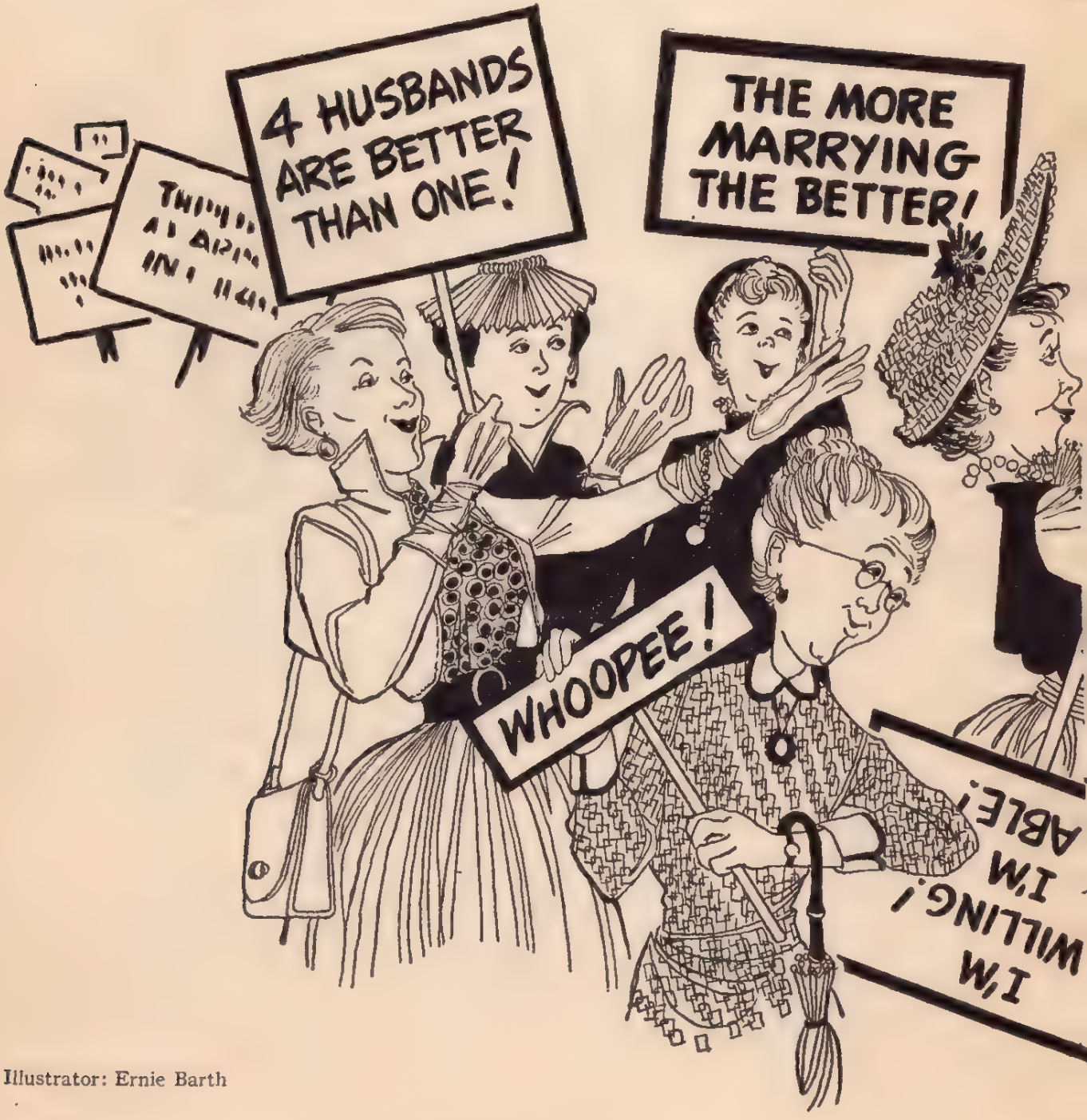
GUSTAV REHBERGER

•

a portfolio . . .

The line drawings by Gustav Rehberger which you will find on the following pages represent an innovation for the readers of Fantastic. *These sketches are essentially mood pieces, intended to communicate a feeling of tension, of human conflict. In another sense, they are symbolic, too, for they depict man's constant struggle against a hostile universe, and his consequent inner torment. We hope you will enjoy their power and significance.*

Do you want to get your project legislated into law? Why, it's easy! That's what we've got a congress for. First you get a good catchy name for your project. Let's see — how about Paramarriage. That's pretty good. It doesn't say anything, but it's interesting. Then you get yourself a pompous ass of a politician — sometimes they're hard to find. The pompous ass part, not the politician — and you're in business! Now you just sit back and howl for action and you'll get what you want — even if it's four husbands for every wife!



Illustrator: Ernie Barth

A Great Day for the Amorous

by RALPH ROBIN

"ANOTHER beer, Mr. Brant?" William Brant in the corner booth pushed volume ten of the Britannica out of the way. Emily took that to mean yes. She drew the beer and set it at his right hand and almost accidentally the nipple of her breast touched his arm.

He brushed his arm as if a fly had lit there and wrote something in one of those notebooks. He

groped for the beer like a blind man.

Emily sighed.

"Frenchy," she yelled, "get that floor mopped. What do you think I've got you hanging around here for?"

The old man shuffled behind the counter and began to fill a bucket. Emily was ashamed.

She shouldn't have taken it out on Frenchy. It wasn't his fault. But here was the first eligible man she had come across in years and he wouldn't even talk to her.

Mr. Brant was a nice-looking man too, or would be if he shaved oftener and wore a necktie. Not that he was really sloppy. He kept his room upstairs neat as a pin even if he was so absent-minded; and he took a shower every morning.

He was lazy, she supposed. He didn't seem to want a job. He spent all his time drinking beer and reading books and scribbling in those notebooks, the kind they used to call composition books in school. But it was his own business. That income he got every month from when he'd made his money would be more than enough to keep him from being a burden.

It wasn't money she wanted. She didn't need it. She was lonely: lonely for a man of her own. Emily caught herself rubbing her eyes.

The breadman came in and she gave him the devil. Yesterday he had left three rye and four white instead of four rye and three white.

"You're getting to be a cross old maid, Emmie," he said impudently. He stared right down her bust, which she knew was one of her best features. "Why don't you and me go out someplace some night after you close here? A high-class place."

"When I need a smart aleck like you, I'll whistle."

But he was a nice-looking boy, she thought after he had left. She wondered how old he really thought she was.

"What do you want for lunch, Mr. Brant?" She had to repeat it twice. She felt like shaking him.

"Anything."

It was the usual conversation and she usually fixed him something special; but he never noticed. He ate his meals without looking at them and paid whatever she figured at the end of every week.

In her hopeless mood she went into the kitchen and made him a boiled-ham sandwich on day-old white bread. She didn't even put lettuce on it.

Her friend Wanda came in and sat down at a table. She looked tired. Wanda worked in the beauty parlor across the street.

"Make me a Manhattan, dear."

Emily mixed the drink and sat down with her.

"Those women are getting me,"

Wanda said with marked weariness.

"Men are worse."

"The only thing wrong with men is there's not enough of them to go around. At least not enough of them that are husband material. It's getting so there's nothing left but the little boys and the selfish bums and the screwballs and the pansies. Now the only way to find a good one is to take him away from a woman that's got one. It's a dog-eat-dog situation."

"You must be a mind reader, Wanda. Just this morning that little boy from Mueller's Bakery was begging me for a date like his heart would break. But who'd want him? It's just like you said. There aren't enough real men to go around and that's a fact. Take Mr. Brant —"

"Sh —"

"He doesn't listen to anything. He doesn't hear a word I say. He's an example. He's content to live in a room with the door closed when he could have the run of a whole house and an affectionate woman to take care of him the way a woman should. And he could go on reading all day and writing in those composition books and I wouldn't even expect him to help in the cafe."

"I don't know what's going to come of it," Wanda said. "What's a woman supposed to do? Go home every night beat down to the soles of her feet — and that's not just talking — Dr. Tinkham practically had to make an operation on the left one — and drink and listen to the radio by myself till I fall asleep? Somebody ought to do something. The government ought to do something. They ought to pass a law."

"You're one hundred percent right," Emily said. "I'm not just thinking of you and me, either. There's so many of us who only want a man to be good to. It isn't fair."

"It's an outrage."

"Him," said Wanda. "What?" said Emily.

"I said it was an outrage," William Brant declared. "It is a social injustice of the most serious kind. It is unjust to the individual woman affected; it limits the happiness of men; and it has far-reaching deleterious effects on society as a whole."

He had risen. He was walking toward their booth while he made that speech, and he struck the table with his fist. "I'm going to do something about it." He pointed at Emily. "I'll marry you first."

Emily's reflexes were excellent. She jumped up and enclosed him with her soft arms.

"What did he mean by 'first'?" Wanda asked.

"My dearest Emily," William Brant said, "the lunch today compared unfavorably with your

previous cooking, which had been excellent."

"You noticed!" Emily exclaimed.

The marriage turned out very well.

Emily had been anxious about one thing. She had wondered whether William Brant, such an educated man, would take an interest in the tenderest side of marriage. He took an interest. In fact if Emily had a complaint it was the rather insincere one she expressed to Wanda:

"Bill sometimes plumb tires me out."

That was the last intimate talk the two women had for a long while. Their friendship started to cool with something that happened the next day.

Wanda was standing at the counter, too unhappy to sit down even if her feet were killing her. She was starting to bewail the short supply of men. Bill on the way to his corner booth gently patted her rump, which was one of Wanda's best features.

He said kindly, "Don't worry. You're next."

Although it was all open and aboveboard right in front of Emily and nothing sneaky about it, still Emily didn't think that Wanda should have looked so pleased when Bill patted her. But Emily was too sensible to quarrel with her husband.

It was a wonderful comfort to have Bill in his corner booth every minute the cafe was open, happily reading and writing. She kept her word and never asked him to do any work.

He began to get big books through the mail and he read those now instead of his encyclopedia. Sometimes he wrote things down out of the books and other times he closed the books and just wrote the things out of his head, Emily guessed. As she told Mr. Antonelli, who always had one drink on his way home, it was a nice clean hobby and Bill wasn't taking a job away from somebody that needed one.

Bill was sociable in a solitary way. He seemed to enjoy the noises of the cafe which started with the rattle of Frenchy's bucket before noon and ended with emotional home-goings at midnight. As the afternoon customers talked louder and Pet came on duty and banged plates and the pinball machines thumped and buzzed and rang, William Brant would write faster and faster.

The television could broadcast a senatorial investigation of counterfeit dog licenses while the juke box sang, "Never tell your baby — love that can't be told — she'll treat you like the rabies — she'll leave you cold." William Brant just smiled and filled another page.

One day Bill sent Frenchy to rent a typewriter and buy a ream of paper. He piled up the composition books with the top one open and began to type. The noise of the typewriter blended familiarly into the racket of the cafe.

He typed for two months. Then he spent weeks going over the typed sheets with a pencil. Then he started typing all over again.

The customers were impressed.

Frenchy was impressed.

Pet was impressed.

The beerman was impressed.

The milkman was impressed.

The man who repaired the pinball machines was impressed.

Even the smart-alecky breadman was impressed.

Mr. Antonelli summed up the sentiment when he whispered in Emily's ear, "It must be a wonderful book he's writing."

Emily was proud.

None of them asked him what he was writing about. They all had the idea that it was too deep for them. But Wanda got Emily's goat one night when she walked right over to his booth and picked up a couple of sheets and read them.

"Do you really mean it, Bill?" she cried.

"I certainly do," William Brant said.

The first publisher who saw *The Unlonely Bed* accepted it. It had an advance sale of 100,000 copies. It held first place among the nonfictional best sellers. The people around Steve's Cafe had been wrong. *The Unlonely Bed* wasn't deep at all. It was a simple, vigorous, plausible argument for paramarriage.

Paramarriage was the author's short name for parallel marriage.

Parallel marriage was the author's name for polygamy.

Bill passed out autographed copies, the first to his wife, and everybody around Steve's Cafe read *The Unlonely Bed.* Emily said: "Of course it's a crazy idea. But it's a wonderful book all right. Else why would so many people buy it? Imagine all those people paying four dollars for a book my Bill wrote out right here in Steve's Cafe."

Pop would have been proud, she thought. Steve had been a great reader. He had read every book Zane Grey had ever written.

"I never married Bill for his money," Emily said to herself, "but now that he's making so much I think I'll just give him a hint and see if he won't air-condition the cafe for my birthday."

Mr. Antonelli said: "Bill, it's a wonderful book, but how would you expect a fellow like me, for instance, to support more than one family? I can't say I go much for the idea. But I'll tell you a funny thing. Marie's all for it. She says another wife could help with the kids and maybe she

could get to see a movie sometime."

"That's precisely the point I make in chapter three, Mr. Antonelli."

Pet said: "Say, I could marry my boy friend and have a baby — and I bet it would be cuter than the one he's got."

"So you could, my dear. But you should develop a less jealous spirit. Read chapter ten again."

Doris Hoke, the manager of the neighborhood Kareful-Kleen, said: "It's just like you wrote in chapter four, Mr. Brant with the girls taking turns working and staying home folks could beat the cost of living and have a nice home life the way those shirts come in without any buttons a man needs more than one wife especially when she's out working all day like that real nice married man who comes in every Friday evening the kind who wouldn't do anything wrong but I can tell how he looks at me when I hand him his bundle he'd make up to me in a minute if it was only what he thought people ought to do you understand?"

William Brant understood.

Dr. Tinkham said: "It's a privilege to meet the celebrated philosopher of Steve's Cafe."

"I have looked forward to meeting Wanda's podiatrist, Dr. Tinkham."

The smart-alecky breadman said: "You sure got something, Mr. Brant. You sure do. There's two girls that's crazy for me and I don't know which to marry. I could marry them both."

"I see you have read chapter six, my boy."

"I sure have. I read the whole book except maybe some of that sob stuff about lonely old women. I read the chapter on sexual adjustment three times." The breadman winked. "But they won't have to worry about no sexcentage with me. How about you, Mr. Brant? You going to practice what you preach?"

"Six rye, four white, and one whole wheat," Emily said.

The tradition that Wanda founded the first Paramarriage Club is not historically correct. The clubs were springing up everywhere, and recent research indicates that the first club was organized in New York City.

But Wanda's club was one of the earliest.

And it was in Wanda's club that a woman lawyer named Fay Rider, a client of Wanda's at the beauty parlor, conceived and wrote the proposed twenty-third amendment to the United States Constitution.

"The right of any unmarried female citizen older than twenty-one years to marry any male citizen older than twenty-one years shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of any previous

marriage or marriages contracted by the male citizen, without regard to whether such prev ous marriage or marriages shall have been dissolved."

The Paramarriage Clubs held parades and public meetings throughout the country. Wanda and Fay planned to have a big parade to Torrance University Stadium, where they wanted Bill to make the main speech.

Bill refused kindly. He had been playing chess with Dr. Tinkham, but he set down his glass and folded his hands over the board. "I am sorry, my dears. I wouldn't be good at that. I have done my part, and now it's up to you."

"What's the matter with you, Brant?" Fay Rider screamed. "Are you with paramarriage or against it? Declare yourself."

"Now your doctrine has come of age," Dr. Tinkham said. "The disciple is a better Brantian than Brant."

"You keep out of this, you corncutter!"

Wanda smiled sweetly. "Bill. Dr. Tinkham. I'm sure Fay doesn't mean those things. Only she's so devoted to winning our fight."

"In the future apologize for me when I'm not around. It's more effective. Come on out of here. We have to see the mayor about the permits."

They hurried away.

"Check, doctor," Bill said.

Emily shook her head. "Crazy as loons, those two. Bill, you better write another book and stop all this nonsense."

Bill moved a knight. "Check, doctor. My dear," Bill said, as always, kindly, "I hardly regard paramarriage as nonsense. For the sake of your future happiness, which is forever my concern, please make an effort to get used to the idea of paramarriage."

"If you mean you're going to marry Wanda, you better get it out of your head. Law or no law, you'll paramarriage over my dead body. I'm so mad I'm hot all over."

Emily turned down the thermostat on the air-conditioner five degrees. She remembered that Bill had bought it for her birthday, and she sobbed.

"Check, doctor. Mate in two moves. Excuse me." Bill got up and put his arms around his wife.

"Hey, can't nobody never get no service around here no more?" a man at the counter yelled.

"Frenchy, take care of the gentleman's needs. Excuse us, doctor." Bill escorted his wife through the kitchen and upstairs.

"Big glass or little glass, mister?" Frenchy asked.

The telephone rang and Frenchy answered.

"Mr. Brant ain't here . . . he's busy . . . he's upstairs lovin' up the missis . . . this is Frenchy

. . . it's the only name I got left . . . no, he loves her up at night too."

"Who was that, Frenchy?" Dr. Tinkham asked. He was sipping bourbon and playing the end game over again.

"Did I say wrong? It was somebody from some 'sociated press."

"I think you said just right, Frenchy."

Two hours later the interview with Frenchy was on the front page of almost every afternoon paper. That night it was the human interest story of every television commentator. It did more for paramarriage than any speech in a stadium could have done. Membership of the Paramarriage Clubs tripled in a week.

Wanda was elected president of the United Paramarriage Clubs of America. Her friendship with William Brant gave her prestige, and the tact which she had learned as a beauty operator helped her to adjust to her responsibilities. But Fay, as national executive secretary and chief counsel, was the driving force.

It was Fay who went to California for three months and managed the UPCA campaign that put Wilton Lightcap in the Senate.

Against the advice of the Democratic leadership — he was nominally a Democrat — Senator Lightcap introduced the proposed twenty-third amendment. The day the vote was taken ten thousand UPCA members were ruining the lawns on Capitol Hill and yelling their heads off. Since seven thousand of the demonstrators were women, the noise was something that the senators did not quickly forget.

Twenty-Third got only three votes, but there was an unprecedented number of sick senators that day.

The turning point was the presidential campaign. Lloyd Weber and James "Jumping Jim" Hastey divided control of the Republican convention, and those expert equivocators agreed on a platform endorsing states' rights. They proposed a constitutional amendment that would ("in the spirit of true American democracy") permit but not compel any state to legalize paramarriage. The platform did not phrase the amendment and did not define what protection would be given to people traveling from paramarital to monogamistic states.

Weber was nominated for president on the third ballot when "Jumping Jim" let it be known that he would accept the vice-presidential nomination.

The Democratic leaders at a secret meeting agreed to adopt a similar plank and they also agreed on a common candidate, Avery Hawk, to stop Senator Lightcap, who had come to the convention with a substantial number of

pledged delegates. But the secret agreement was betrayed to UPCA by the virgin sister-in-law of the governor of Alabama.

Fay Rider loosed her Clubs. Eighty thousand zealots surrounded the convention hall. Howling women pushed by the police and filled the galleries. The delegates were dazed by the unending chant: "TWENTY-THIRD AND LIGHTCAP. TWENTY-THIRD AND LIGHTCAP. TWENTY-THIRD AND LIGHTCAP . . ." They amended the platform from the floor approving Twenty-Third without qualification.

They nominated Lightcap on the first ballot.

It was fortunate that William Brant had air-conditioned Steve's Cafe. The cafe was crowded tight with sweaty bodies on the night the Democratic convention surrendered. They were watching the convention on a color-television screen covering an entire wall: Bill's anniversary present to his wife.

"TWENTY-THIRD AND LIGHTCAP," they chanted with the brightly dressed ghosts on the wall.

Scarcely heard, the juke box sang, "Never tell your babies — love that can't be told — they'll treat you like the rabies — they'll leave you cold." The change in number had made the song topical and revived it as a hit. It had also improved the rhyme.

Nothing was being served except beer, and the beer was free. Nobody bothered to wash glasses. All the hard liquor had been moved upstairs, and upstairs Emily sat on a case of blended whiskey and cried.

Wanda sat in the corner booth with William Brant and held his hand.

"I feel so sorry about the way Emily is acting," she said. "I never expected her to be such a reactionary. Why, she's practically a hogamist."

"Now don't be unkind, my dear. Emily's not really a hogamist. Look at the damage she could do with the reporters if she wanted to help the hogamists."

"She's too loyal to you," Wanda granted. "But just the same she says she's not going to stand for having a rival wife. She won't even listen to me when I offer her a very favorable sex-centage."

"She hasn't got used to the idea yet. She will come around."

"I doubt it," Wanda said. "But anyway after the amendment's ratified there won't be anything she can do about it."

Photographers pushed through the crowd. William Brant kissed Wanda several times. It was a popular notion in the Clubs that theirs would be the first paramarriage.

The hogamists (as the Clubs

called their opponets) showed a surprising lack of vitality before the conventions. After the conventions they woke up; but it was late, and besides they acted unwisely.

Several hundred important monogamists came together hastily to decide on a course of action. They could not of course support the Democrats, who were now completely in the hands of UPCA. In their own best interest they should have supported the Republicans.

Instead they denounced states' rights as a "dangerous, evil, and completely unacceptable wedge that once driven into the wall would inevitably bring down in ruins the American Home." They improvised the American Marriage Party on the spot and nominated an ex-Republican and an ex-Democrat to be their candidates for president and vice-president.

The American Marriage Party got about eight million votes, taking most of them from the Republicans. The result was a Democratic landslide.

The new Congress passed Twenty-Third: easily in the House, but only after a long and violent debate in the Senate. The Senate added a compromise section, which the House had to accept.

The compromise provided that no man married before the adoption of Twenty-Third could contract a paramarriage without the consent of his original wife.

An argument started in UPCA's fancy headquarters in Washington, continued on the plane, and raged in whispers in William Brant's booth in Steve's Cafe. Fay was satisfied with the new version of Twenty-Third. Wanda wanted the Clubs to oppose the compromise.

"We should call for a constitutional convention," Wanda said. "Get around Congress that way."

"A little learning is a dangerous thing," Fay said. "I should have left you talking about dry scalp to silly women."

"You should have left me! Who pulled you out of your stinking little law practice and made a big shot out of you?"

"Wanda, you're a fool. Look around now. Jerks playing the pinball machines. Those silly girls watching the wrestling. Nobody's even paying attention to us. All over the country membership's dropping. Dues are falling off. The Clubs think the battle's won and they're losing interest. And the politicians will doublecross us in a minute if they feel the pressure lifting. This is no time to sic a lot of jealous wives on us."

"I'll do whatever Bill thinks best," Wanda said.

"We must not look at it personally," William Brant said. "Fay is right."

Pet was taking care of all the customers, and Emily came over to the booth. She was very cordial.

"It's wonderful work you girls are doing. Think of all the lonely women you're going to help."

"So you're really in favor of paramarriage now?" Fay asked.

"Why, I always was. The very day Bill proposed we were talking about doing something like that for the women."

"Then you're going to let Bill marry me?" Wanda said eagerly.

"Certainly not," Emily said.

UPCA found a second wind for the campaigns in the states. The Clubs publicly and Fay privately, bore down mercilessly on governors and legislators. Also, Fay made deals with local interests that wanted various state laws enacted.

In many states the governors called special sessions of their legislatures. Very quickly thirty-three states ratified the paramarriage amendment. Five more were needed to make up the necessary three-fourths of the fifty states in the Union. Painfully, and in one instance rather expensively, UPCA drove Pennsylvania, Ohio, South Carolina, and New Mexico into the fold. William Brant's own state was holding out so that it could be the thirty-eighth to ratify.

In spite of everything that Fay could do to stop it, the idea spread, both in and out of the Clubs, that William Brant and Wanda should be married the moment the legislature completed its vote. The mayor of Torrence invited himself to perform the ceremony and accepted his own invitation in a single interview with the newspapers.

It was decided by everybody except anybody who had any right to decide anything that the ceremony would be held in the Torrance University Stadium and would be televised all over the country.

President Lightcap agreed to attend. The governor agreed to attend. The lieutenant-governor was going to stay at the capitol and signal the exact time of ratification by pressing a button. The electrical impulse would release three white doves from a helicopter over the stadium: one male dove and two females. The governor would then direct the mayor to perform the ceremony.

The night before this pageantry was to take place, Steve's Cafe was closed. It would have been torn to pieces for souvenirs if it had been open. Most of the city's police and two hundred special sheriff's deputies blocked the building against the happy crowd.

William Brant, in his corner, smiled sadly over a glass of beer.

Emily sobbed.

Wanda wept.

Fay screamed.

Dr. Tinkham poured himself a drink of bourbon and rang up fifty cents.

"I won't sign any permission," Emily repeated.

"A lot of things will happen," Fay screamed judiciously. "First, those halfwits in the legislature will hold up the vote. Second, they'll change their minds. Third, no other state will act. Fourth, paramarriage will collapse with a loud whoosh. Fifth, people will wonder what got in them anyway. Sixth, they'll investigate to find the villains and fill up television. Seventh, we'll all go to jail."

"That's silly," Emily said. "Nobody did anything wrong, except maybe you. Maybe it's true what those hogamists said. That you gave bribes and did other things that were against the law. But nobody else did anything."

"Oh, no! Bill only blew the bubble and you only burst it and Wanda's only the president of UPCA. When the people, God bless them, want somebody to go to jail, he goes to jail. You can always find a law. Listen to those animals!"

Outside the crowd was taking up the chant: "WE WANT WANDA — WE WANT BILL. WE WANT WANDA — WE WANT BILL . . ."

"Tomorrow it will be, 'We'll hang Emmie — we'll hang Bill.' "

"Why don't you do something, Bill?" Wanda said in sudden anger. "Why don't you talk to your wife? I'm beginning to think that you're a secret hogamist yourself."

"How dare you?" Emily cried. "He is not a hogamist. He's argued with me till he's blue in the face." Her lips set. "But I'm not going to sign the permission — I don't care what happens."

William Brant finished his beer and rose. "I'm sorry, Emily." He kissed her. "I'm sorry, Wanda." He kissed her. "I'm sorry, Fay." He kissed her too. "I'm going out to tell them the truth."

"Wait," Fay said. "They don't have to know now. Why don't you take Wanda and string them along till tomorrow, anyway?"

"It would be that much worse."

"WE WANT WANDA — WE WANT BILL . . ."

William Brant put his hand on the doorlatch.

"Hold on a minute, if you please, Mr. Brant."

"Of course, Dr. Tinkham." William Brant waited courteously.

Dr. Tinkham turned to Emily. "Mrs. Brant, allow me to speak frankly as a man of science. We podiatrists have an intimate knowledge of female psychology. While sitting at the feet of our women patients, reducing their callosities and prescribing for their weak metatarsi, we are called upon to shave the rough spots from their psyches and to strengthen the arches of their

minds. While I have not had the pleasure of treating your feet, my trained podiatrist's eye tells me that the sex act is very important to you."

"Well, doctor, I'm a healthy woman and Bill is a healthy man."

"Exactly. I ask you, Mrs. Brant, to weigh the emotional consequences that would ensue should your husband or yourself or both of you be imprisoned on a phony rap."

An image of wire mesh filled Emily's mind. She saw herself on one side and Bill on the other, their bodies straining for each other against the taut wire.

Fay saw the new doubt in Emily's face and nudged Wanda.

Wanda pleaded: "Listen to reason, Emmie. We three could be so happy together. And my offer of a sex-centage of sixty still holds good."

Dr. Tinkham poured himself another drink and placed a half dollar on the register, not daring to make a noise. William Brant moved a step toward his wife. Fay Rider held her breath.

"Eighty," Emily said.

"Seventy," Wanda said. "That's the highest I'll go."

"I won't go below seventy-five."

Fay made fierce faces at Wanda.

"I'm human too," Wanda said. "I don't see why I have to make all the concessions."

"Well, if you're going to be that way —"

"As Wanda's lawyer," Fay screamed, "I offer seventy-two-point-five on her behalf."

Emily barely nodded.

"Sign right here," Fay said. "Here's the pen. Thank you. I'll witness, and you, Tinkham." Fay put the signed permission in her brief case and locked the case.

William Brant embraced his wife.

"All this has made me very tired," Emily said. "Bill, let's go upstairs and rest a while."

"Of course, my dear."

"Will that count toward the sex-centage?" Wanda muttered to her lawyer.

"I'm afraid not."

"WE WANT WANDA — WE WANT BILL . . ."

Fay said to William Brant, "I'll go and tell the animals you'll be out there in half an hour with your wife and fiancee."

"Yes, tell the people that," said William Brant.

The publications of the William Brant Memorial Foundation almost ignore the later life of the man who revolutionized American folkways. As a result, many absurd legends have already gained credence — for example, that Brant lived thirty years in a Buddhist monastery — but the following are the prosaic facts established by impartial research:

William Brant deserted his wives after five years because Emily, with Wanda's support, refused to let him marry two waitresses from Child's Restaurant and a professor of anthropology at the University of Torrance. When eventually his wives divorced him, he married four girls in Chicago who spent most of his money and ran off with a string quartet.

After that he lived alone in a small house in Cleveland, writing books proposing various social reforms. None had the success of *The Unlonely Bed*, although one of them, *The Right to Dream*, attracted quite a few adherents. In *The Right to Dream* William Brant proposed the unrestricted and tax-free sale of opium, hashish, and synthetic narcotics as well as all alcoholic beverages. This, Brant maintained, would be the most efficient method of increasing the total happiness of the whole population.

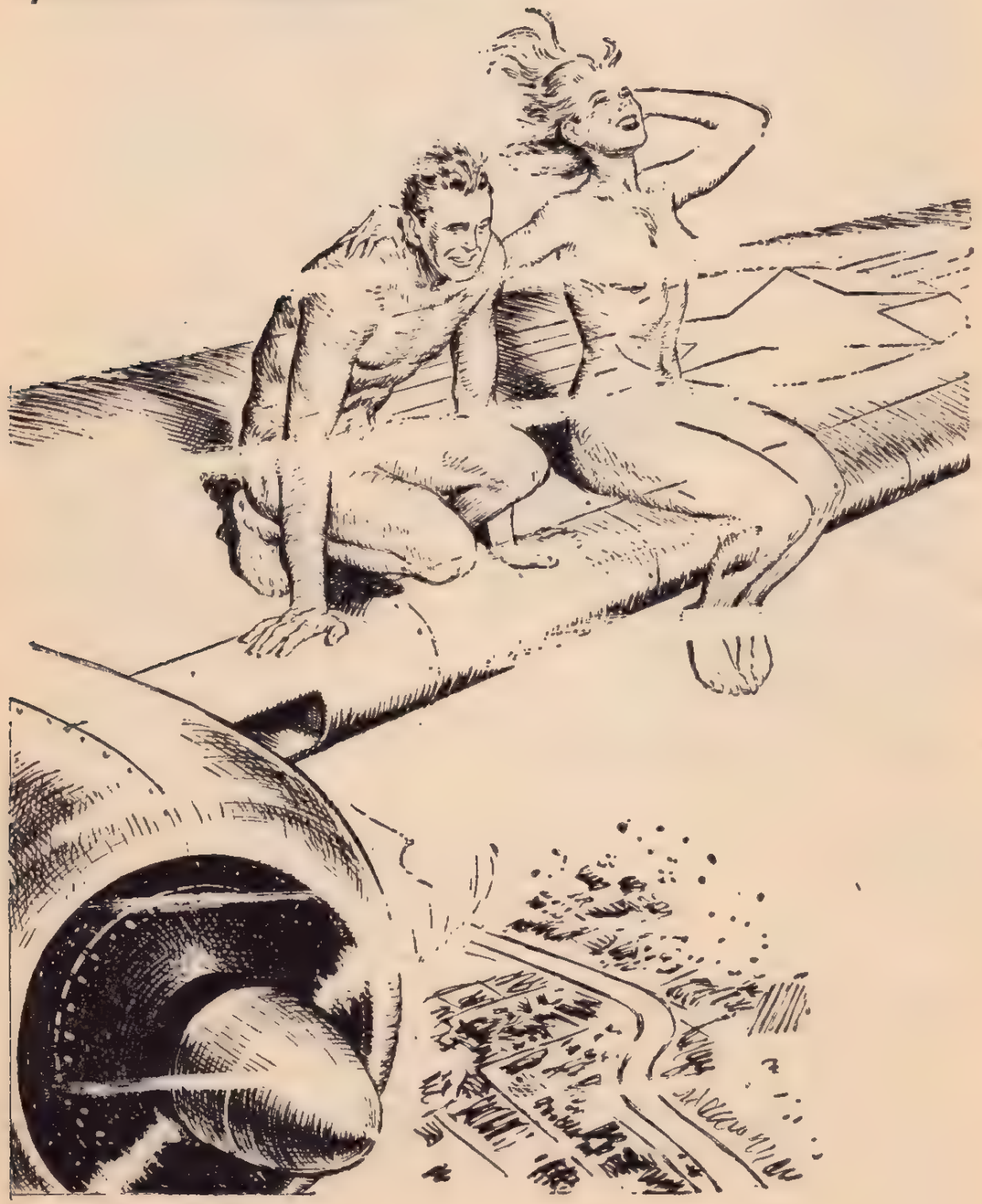
William Brant died in 1989. Oddly, the old man's death passed almost unnoticed at the time . . .

One more note, of human rather than historical interest: Emily and Wanda Brant, after their divorce from Brant, married Dr. Tinkham, agreeing to sex-centages of forty and forty. The other twenty points were for Fay Rider, who also married him. She was lonely too, she said, and respected his intelligence.

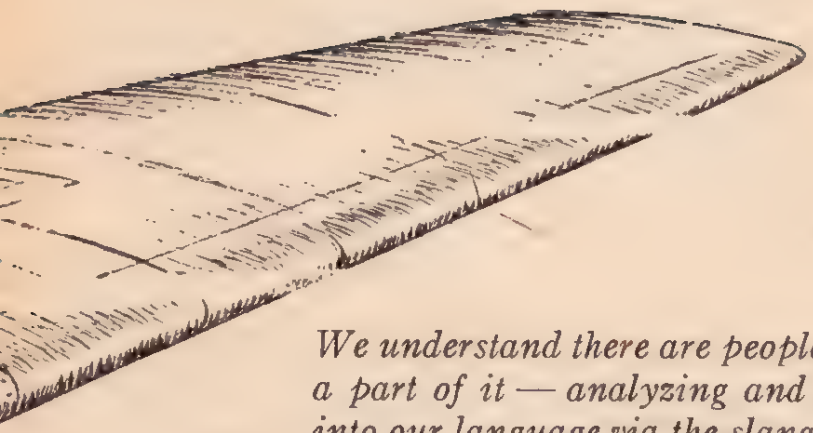
"I'll have to fix that lock in the morning."

AMPHYTRION 40

By WILLIAM P. McGIVERN



Illustrator: Henry Sharp



We understand there are people who spend their time — at least a part of it — analyzing and classifying new words that pop into our language via the slang route. If such there be, we'd like some information on the word "zany." A fine adjective indeed, that. You can hear it for the first time and yet know exactly what it means. It goes further than gayety but doesn't quite reach madness. We wonder who thought it up.

But regardless — zany is the word for Bill McGivern's yarn, "Amphytrion 40," a tale of two characters who were naked right down to the spirit. First they had to get bodies. Then —

THEY floated in a shining sphere above the Northeastern section of the United States, examining and classifying its customs and inhabitants.

They studied these bipeds and learned where and from what they had evolved; they apprehended their drives, goals, and motivations; they guessed, with fine accuracy, how they were likely to develop in the future.

This took them several minutes. Then they became bored.

"Terribly primitive," she said.

"Yes, depressingly so. You noted their source of energy?" he asked.

"They assimilate each other, it would seem. They think of it as 'eating'."

"Not each other. They 'eat' animals."

"Well, what's the difference?"

"Very little, obviously. The animals seem happier, I'd say."

"Are they pleased at being eaten? Is it a source of pleasure to them?"

He was very bored now. "Oh,

I don't know," he said.

They floated for a while on the wing of a jet plane, slightly dismayed by the clumsiness of its construction, and the inefficiency of its power source.

"It's probably the first refinement of the wheel," he said.

Then, rising a few thousand miles, they drifted beside saucer-shaped objects which, in design and function, were a slight improvement over the jet plane.

"These are from another planet," he said, slightly interested. He read the thoughts that emanated from the thinking matter within the saucer-shaped objects, and learned all about Martians.

"Terribly primitive," he said.

"Their machines indicate a dim intelligence, however," she said.

"Yes, they are another stride away from the wheel," he agreed.

They returned to the atmosphere of Earth, hovering again above the Northeastern United States.

"Well, shall we look any further?" he asked.

"I don't see much point to it," she said.

"First hand investigation wouldn't interest you?"

"Oh, I don't know. They have a few tensions and attractions — between themselves, of course — which are curious."

"I wish you wouldn't hedge so. Shall we go down or not?"

"Oh, very well."

"Very well, *what?*"

"Let's go down."

Their names, which they never had reason to use, were Tarina and Illar. They came from a star whose light would never reach Earth; the Solar System would have ceased to exist by that time. In the immense wheel of time, through the stately march of ages, they had refined themselves to perfection, subjected matter to the bonds of intellect. They were invulnerable and immortal; they had need of nothing outside themselves. They did not eat, drink, sleep or mate; their bodies, which had atrophied to vestigial tendrils, had no functions to perform and they kept them invisible.

"What will we need?" she asked.

"Oh, a few things. Bodies, shelter. The camouflage is important but simple. I can take care of it on the way. Are you ready?"

"Of course."

"Very well." . . .

They faced each other a few seconds later in a furnished room. They smiled awkwardly, and then she looked down at herself and giggled.

"I feel absolutely idiotic," she said. "Please don't stare. These huge hands, and fingers with *nails* on them. And this hair coming down to my shoulders. Are you sure you didn't blunder?"

"You know that isn't possible," he said. "You're just surprised, that's all. We won't get used to these ridiculous bodies, of course, but after a bit they won't seem so bad."

He looked at himself in the full-length mirror in the back of the bathroom door. His hair was black and short, his teeth white, and his skin clear and tanned. He was tall, broad shouldered, and wore slacks and a sports shirt.

He burst out laughing.

"Don't," she said. "It's not very nice. After all the people here have no alternative."

"I can't help it," he said. "Look at my teeth. Am I supposed to tear and chew things with them? They're big enough, actually."

"But of course. You 'eat' with them."

"Oh, yes. That will be quite an experience."

She came over beside him and stared at herself, trying to hold back her giggles. Her hair was dark and shining, and her lips were full and red. She wore a gray flannel skirt, and a white silk blouse. Her face was heart-shaped, and her skin was smooth and pale. She had two arms, two legs, and two breasts.

"The proportions aren't bad, but everything is so *immense*," she said.

There was a knock on the door.

"Well, what's this?" she said.

"Let's think with their brains," he said. "We'll learn more about them that way." He frowned, staring at the door. "Why, I can't tell who's there," he said, in a puzzled voice. "It's incredible. They're brains are weak."

"Well, it was your idea."

"Unless I use my perceptions, I'll have to go to the door and open it to find out," he said.

"Go ahead then."

"All right." He crossed the room and opened the door. There was a woman standing in the hallway with a key in her hand. She was small, with gray hair, and a good-humored face that was set now in an expression of confused annoyance. Behind her stood a couple with luggage in their hands. They looked bewildered.

"I thought I heard talking in here," the gray-haired woman said. "Now just how did you folks get in?"

Illar gave up the attempt to use his new brain, and retreated to his own perceptions. He realized that this was the landlady, and that she was beset with two problems. One, had she rented this room to them after having had a few drinks which dulled her memory, and two, had she asked them for six or eight dollars per day?

"Why, you let us have the room this morning," he said. "We discussed the terms with you in detail. You had a cold, and were

taking a drop of something to relieve it at the time."

"Oh, yes," the woman said vaguely.

"It was eight dollars a day," Illar said. "Surely you remember that?"

"Oh, of course," the woman grinned. "Fancy the whole thing slipping my mind that way. Excuse me for bothering you." She turned to the couple at her back, and said, "Well, I'll have to put you folks up somewhere else. Let's try the next floor."

Illar closed the door and walked over to Tarina who was still standing in front of the mirror. "Shall we go out?" he asked. "We can learn all we need to know in a few hours. I'd like to leave tomorrow morning."

"All right."

"What are you doing?"

She had pushed her long black hair up on top of her head and was studying the effect with a small frown. "Do you think this would be better?" she said.

"Better than what?"

"Better than the way it was before."

"I can't see that it makes any difference."

"Oh, can't you?" she said.

"Certainly not. Let's go."

She let her hair fall down to her shoulders. "Very well."

Their rooming house was in the East Eighties. They walked down Fifth Avenue, absorbing and interpreting phenomena with effortless efficiency. The weather, cool and pleasant, the buildings, as primitive to their eyes as anthills would have been to a human's, the traffic, the strolling couples, the news vendors, policemen, drug stores, delicatessens, department stores — all of this they studied and classified.

"It's really depressing," she said. "Why do you suppose they go on existing?"

"I can't imagine," he said. "Shall we try 'eating' something?"

"Oh, I couldn't really. I can go just so far in these experiments — then I stop."

"You'll have to, I'm afraid," he said. "That body you're using has needs."

"Oh, very well," she said, with a small shudder.

They entered a delicatessen and ordered sandwiches and milk. When it was put before them she stared at it for a moment, and color crept up in her cheeks. "Don't watch, please," she said.

"Oh, go ahead. Everyone's doing it."

They ate the food quickly, avoiding each other's eyes, and then went outside and walked along in a guilty silence.

"It's a gross sort of business," he said, at last.

"I — I feel disgusting. Imagine doing such physical, intimate

things regularly. It's ghastly."

"It would be ghastly," he said.

They experimented with a few other typical habits. They had whisky at a bar, and Illar bought a pack of cigarettes. The liquor burned their throats terribly, and the cigarettes made them cough.

"What's the sense of these things?" she said angrily. She threw her cigarette into the street and dabbed at her watering eyes.

"Perhaps they dull their senses."

"How could they be any duller?"

"That's a point," he said. They stopped at Times Square, tired from the walk, and very bored and lonely in the jostling crowds.

"I've had quite enough," she said.

"Very well. We'll go back to our room."

"This silly body is already exhausted and over-heated," she said. "I wish I could throw it away. It's perfectly useless."

"We'll rest tonight, compare our reactions, and leave tomorrow."

"Good."

They returned to their rooms, and she slipped out of her leather pumps and stretched out on the big, soft double bed. "At last, a pleasant sensation," she said.

He lit a cigarette and went into the bathroom.

"Why are you smoking those silly things?" she called.

"Why, I don't know. Something to keep my hands busy, I suppose," he said. "Come in here," he said, a few seconds later. His voice was excited.

She joined him and glanced around, studying the tile floor, the deep, enameled tub, and the hand basin. "They wash themselves, obviously," she said. "What's so odd about that?" Then she saw the object in the corner at which he was staring, and she put a hand nervously to her throat. "No, no, it's impossible," she said.

"I'm afraid it's inevitable." He laughed suddenly. "Don't be so prudish. It's — well, natural."

"You're absolutely disgusting."

"I'm merely pointing out —"

"Don't mention it again, please," she said, flushing.

"It's simply been so long that we —"

"I won't listen to you," she said, and strode back into the bedroom. "You seem to get some childish pleasure from discussing these — things."

"Very well. I'm going to take a bath, and get ready for bed." He looked at her straight, angry back, and an impish little smile touched his lips. "Does that euphemism satisfy your sense of propriety?"

"Oh, be still," she said crossly.

He closed the door of the bathroom and emerged fifteen minutes

later, his thick black hair still damp from the bath. He had a towl knotted about his flat waist and was smoking another cigarette, "Your turn," he said.

"Thanks so much," she said drily.

"Leave the door open so we can talk."

The door slammed resoundingly.

She was in the bath an hour. When she came out he was lying on the bed asleep. She stared down at him for a few seconds, watching the rise and fall of his chest, and the muscles in his arms and shoulders. Her throat felt curiously dry; the cigarette, she thought. She looked at herself in the mirror again, noticing the way the rich, blue-black hair framed her face. It wasn't a bad effect really, if you had to be burdened with such primitive accessories. She remembered some of the girls she had seen walking in the streets. Their hair wasn't so pretty. And some of them were ungainly. She studied her figure; she was wearing only a slip, and her feet were bare. Yes, the proportions were pleasing, she thought, only she felt so out-sized and gross. Then she glanced at him, asleep on the bed, and realized how much bigger he was. That made her feel small. Small and helpless. What a weird, weird idea, really! She thought of all she had seen, and realized that there was no point to it. That was the curious thing; it was totally without point or meaning.

She sat on the edge of the bed and, after a moment or so, touched him on the arm. "I just wanted to say good night," she said, when he opened his eyes.

"Oh. Good night." He got up and lit another cigarette.

"You're smoking too much," she said.

He laughed. "It's a silly habit, isn't it? I'd better quit." He sat down beside her, yawning, and put his hand on her knee.

"Let's go right now," he said.

"Back?"

"Well, where else?"

"I don't care." She wet her lips. "Please take your hand off my knee?"

"Why?"

"Does there have to be a reason?"

"I'm interested, scientifically. Is it uncomfortable?"

"Not exactly."

"Your reaction is curious. The contact means nothing to me, you see. I might as well be touching the bed covers or the floor."

"I don't care how it affects you."

"But it doesn't affect me at all."

"What an advantage there is in insensitivity."

He glanced down at her knee, mildly interested in the enigmatic quality of her reaction. Her legs

were highly nonfunctional. They weren't strong, obviously. She couldn't support much weight on them, or employ them to propel herself into the air. They were too thin. Slender was a better word, he thought. Still they were shaped rather artistically, with a graceful line from the slim, fine-boned ankles to the fuller thighs. The skin was fair and soft; absolutely useless as a protection against climate or terrain. It was really very odd, he thought, that the genes of this species should produce such ornamental but useless properties. And most curious, was the undeniable fact that the contours and texture of these productions should be pleasant to the touch. Now why was that? he wondered, drawing on his cigarette.

"Please," she said.

"Wait, I've got a little problem," he said. What was it? He examined the objects that stimulated him, searching for an answer. The number of pores, which he could count instantly, and even the inner construction, the ligaments and bones, the arteries and blood vessels, the corpuscles, red and white — none of these factors was responsible for the curious feeling of pleasure he obtained from touching her knee. The sum of the parts did not give him an answer, he realized.

He felt oddly uncomfortable then, with a curious constriction about his chest, and a dryness in his throat. Also, he realized flushing, there was something else. He stood and walked to the window, drawing deeply on his cigarette. These bodies were considerably more primitive than he had suspected. He raised the window and felt the cool air on his face. That was better. In a few moments he flipped his cigarette away and returned to the bed. She was under the covers, her hair spilled in a dark cloud on the pillows. He stretched out on top of the covers, pulling the comforter over his body.

"They have a thoroughly pointless existence," he said, at last.

"Yes, that's what I've decided."

"They tire easily, and they sleep. They hunger quickly, and they eat. That seems to be it."

"Absolutely."

"You don't think we've missed anything?"

"What could we possibly have missed?"

"Well —" He paused, feeling the heat in his cheeks. He laughed lightly. "They mate, of course."

She sat up straight in the bed, hugging the covers about her white shoulders. "Illar," she said, using his name for the first time in thousands of years. "Illar," she said, and her voice was high and outraged. "Are you thinking, are you suggesting —"

"No, no, of course not," he said

hurriedly. "I'd be the last one —"

"The rest was bad enough. The 'eating', and that thing in the bathroom, but really, if you've slipped down so far that you think —"

"Don't be absurd," he said, and now his voice was loud and angry. "What ever gave you the idea that I could be interested in that sort of thing?"

"Well —" She hesitated. "I'm relieved to hear you say that."

"The thought is preposterous."

"Of course. I'm sorry. You could never be — could you?"

"Certainly not."

"I'm — glad. Good night."

"Good night."

They said no more. They lay on opposite sides of the bed, their eyes firmly closed. It was hours before they went to sleep.

The next morning she awakened to a strange but pleasant aroma tickling her nose. Illar was sitting on the edge of the bed with a tray containing cartons of coffee and scrambled-egg sandwiches on toast.

"That looks very good," she said. "I — I wouldn't mind eating it. Isn't that strange?"

"We're hungry now," Illar said. "That's the secret of this eating business. If you're hungry it's not quite so repulsive a routine." He ate half of a sandwich, chewing vigorously, and washed it down with mouthfuls of strong, hot coffee. "With effort I'm overcoming my natural distaste," he said, reaching for another sandwich.

"I can be strong, too," she said, reaching for food and drink.

After breakfast she bathed and dressed. She realized with amusement as she stared at herself in the mirror that she was becoming ridiculously concerned about this body she was using. Now for instance, she was trying to imagine how its coloring would blend with another type of dress. She laughed, chiding herself for these trivial speculations, but even as she laughed she realized that she was observing the whiteness of her teeth, and the lights that laughter lit in her eyes.

When she came out of the bathroom she saw that Illar was gazing at her oddly.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"Nothing. You were laughing, that's all."

"Well, is there anything wrong with that?"

"No, of course not. It — it sounded pleasant, however."

"You'll accuse me of being happy next," she said drily.

"Don't be ridiculous." They both knew, of course, that happiness was impossible. All positive and negative emotional planes were inaccessible to them; they had conditioned themselves to the neutral areas that lay between happiness and unhappiness, be-

tween laughter and tears, between hope and despair. Their psyches were passive and inert. They had acquired, laboriously and tediously, this highest goal, this Nirvana of the mind.

"I think we should take a walk," he suggested now.

"Last night you were eager to be going back."

"I still am. However, I think you should see the city in the morning. It's a different set of stimuli."

"Very well," she said.

They left their rooming house and walked East toward Fifth Avenue. It was a dingy section, the habitat of students, actors, writers, and artists. The brownstones huddled close to each other, as if for warmth, and a few lean cats prowled the gutters.

"This must be where the slaves live," she said.

"My inference, too."

Fifth Avenue was different. They strolled past sturdily prosperous shops, chic millinery establishments, and massive hotels.

She stopped at one particular store front, and lingered until Illar began tapping his foot impatiently.

"Come along," he said. "What are you staring at?"

"That dress," she said. "Do you see the one I mean? It's got slim, simple lines, and a very attractive flaring collar.

"Of course I see it."

"Do you think it would look well on me?"

He laughed. "What an absurd question?"

"Why?" she said sharply.

"You — the real you — could be wrapped up in one of the sleeves of that dress."

"I'm not talking about the *real* me," she said, half-angrily. "I mean me, just as I am now."

He shrugged. "I'm sure I wouldn't know. Come along now."

They returned to their rooming house at mid-morning. Illar was conscious of Tarina's petulant silence. He glanced at her every now and then, noting the stubborn set of her jaw, and wondering what was wrong.

There was a couple standing on the porch of their rooming house. They presented a sharp contrast to the bleakness of the neighborhood. The girl, particularly. She was wearing a gold lame evening dress, ankle-strap sandals, and a giant purple orchid pinned to her slim waist. Her hair was soft and fine, the color of honey poured in the sunlight, and her delicately shaped features were informed with good-humor and vitality. The man wore evening clothes, and he wasn't as attractive as the girl. In fact, he wasn't attractive at all. He was middle-aged, with sagging chinline, and weary eyes set in gray sockets of flesh. He

looked very tired. The girl, however, looked as if she might go on forever, dancing, skipping, singing, laughing.

They stood aside as Illar and Tarina mounted the steps. The man stared at Illar, his tired eyes narrowing thoughtfully. When Illar reached for the door, the man said, "Excuse me, young man."

"Yes?" Illar said. He glanced at the man, and at the girl, who was smiling at him, her lips parted slightly.

"Are you an actor?" the man asked.

"I'm sorry, no," Illar said.

"Don't be sorry about it. You're lucky," the man said. He sounded friendly, despite his apparent boredom and fatigue. "Look, my name is Jeremy Webster. I'm a theatrical producer, which, if you *were* an actor, is a name toward which you would say your prayers each morning."

Illar inspected the man's mind, seeing all sorts of complexes and attitudes, none of which were very interesting. There was pride, egomania, a vast need to be loved, a conviction of persecution, and a desire to wrong others to prevent them from wronging him. Also, there was some warmth and sympathy, a small interest in other people, an awareness of his own insignificance.

"I've never acted professionally," Illar said. "Only in college." Why had he said this? he wondered. He knew Tarina was staring at him in amazement, while he, in turn, was staring at the sunny-faced blonde.

Jeremy Webster laughed. "You know who I am then," he said.

"Oh, of course," Illar said.

"Look, you've got something," Webster said, in a crisper voice. "I don't what the hell exactly, but it's worth checking. The way you hold your head, the line of your features — it's something. Maybe it's something good. You want to take a crack at a part in my new play?"

"Why, I'd love to," Illar said.

Tarina glared at him and took a deep breath.

"Well, fine." Webster gave Illar a card. "Come down this afternoon. Now, where the hell are my manners? This is Dawn Evans. We've been out all night, and she's ready for a Maypole dance. She's fabulous. I need alcohol, benzedrine, codeine, and sixteen hours of sleep before I can sign my name. Who're you people?"

"My name is Farthington Pembroke," Illar said.

Webster winced. "We'll have to do something about that. And your wife, eh?"

"No," Tarina said in an extremely clear voice. "We live together to cut expenses. My husband is in the army."

Webster made a strangling sound and popped a white tablet

in his mouth. He shook his head. "I'm terribly afraid that I heard you correctly," he said. "Well, it's none of my business. Dawn, this is Farthington Pembroke, and some GI's wife, who shall be nameless."

Illar shook the girl's slim but surprisingly strong hand. "I hope we can all see each other again," he said.

"That's possible," Webster said. "Dawn is trying out for the show, too." He looked at her, oblivious to everyone else then, and smiled slowly. "She's doing it the hard way. Can you imagine that?"

Dawn Evans looked demure, or as demure as a girl in a gold lame gown *can* look, and patted Webster's arm lightly. "We're the best friends in the world, of course."

"Yeah, and ain't that a helluva note," Webster said. "Well, I'm off. See you kids at four. Think tall." He went down the steps and turned toward Fifth Avenue.

Illar held the door for Dawn and Tarina. They went into the hallway, and stood together for an instant. They were all smiling at each other. "Would you like to have some coffee with me?" Dawn said.

"In a word, no," Tarina said, and swept up the stairs.

Illar followed her, smiling sheepishly.

Dawn shrugged.

Inside their room Tarina wheeled about and put her hands on her hips.

"What was the meaning of all that nonsense?"

"I want to get closer to these people," Illar said stiffly. "I wish to work with them for a bit, to understand them, to complete our investigation in a thorough —"

"Oh, stop babbling," Tarina said.

Illar drew himself up and said firmly, "Since this seems to be a moment of bad-tempered criticism, perhaps you would be good enough to explain your churlish behavior to that girl?"

Tarina laughed and pounded a fist gently against her forehead. "This is the ultimate! That simpleton wouldn't understand the difference between a curtsy and a kick in the posterior. I have never, in all our investigations, met a more completely primitive type."

"You're completely wrong," Illar said, with considerable heat. "She's got very warm impulses. Did you feel her sensibilities? They are beautifully developed."

"Is that all you're interested in?" Tarina said icily. "Her warm beautiful sensibilities? Perhaps you'd like to subject her to the clinical examination you began with me last night."

"I began nothing with you," Illar snapped. "I was interested, scientifically, in certain stimuli.

You're deliberately dragging this discussion into the crudest of channels."

Tarina fluttered a hand airily. "Oh, it wasn't I who began drooling about beautiful sensibilities, my dear. That, if my memory serves, was your area of exploration."

"You're quite impossible for some reason," Illar said.

"Oh I am, am I? How do you think you looked, my dear, preening yourself under that man's flattery?"

"I did not preen."

"Well, simper might be a better word."

Illar strode to the mirror and stared at himself, turning his head this way and that. "He said it was the way I held my head, that's all. It wasn't flattery."

"And the line of your features," Tarina said, laughing softly. "Don't forget that."

"Well, what's so funny about it?"

"My dear, this is rather touching. You're delighted because you're handsome. How primitive can you get!"

Illar turned to her, recovering his poise. "Don't be absurd," he said. "Physical appearance is the most insignificant characteristic of matter."

"Of course. That wart on your chin, for instance. It couldn't matter less."

Illar sprang back to the mirror, and stared at his chin. It was solidly molded, unblemished.

Tarina threw herself on the bed and buried her face in a pillow. She was laughing so hard that the springs creaked. "Oh, my dear," she said at last, in a muffled, choking voice. "You thought you had a wart. Physical appearance is the most insignificant —" She couldn't go on. Her voice dissolved into peals of laughter.

Illar stared down at her, clenching and unclenching his hands slowly. He looked at the rounded curve of her buttocks, and his right palm itched. This dismayed him slightly, and tempered his anger. He actually wanted to strike her; he could almost feel the passage of his hand through the air, hear the satisfying whack! as it landed on her invitingly vulnerable tail.

Why, this was terrible!

What had happened to brutalize his instincts so swiftly?

Now that he had himself in control, he realized that the impulse had only been cerebral. He had entertained it fleetingly, clinically, but there hadn't been the slightest chance of its being translated into action.

Nothing she might do could prompt him to strike her, he knew.

Still giggling, Tarina said, "Dear, you're a ham."

Illar spanked her resoundingly on the rump.

"You go too far," he said

sternly, rubbing her cute posterior.

She let out a yelp and jerked herself up to a sitting position, but by that time the door was closing on Illar's stiff, injured back.

The door slammed, and Tarina put her head down and began to weep.

Jeremy Webster's offices were in Rockefeller Center, on the twenty-fifth floor. The reception room was awesomely chaste and silent; gray drapes hung at the windows, matching the walls and carpeting, and the only sound came from the ragged breathing of the half dozen young men and women who were waiting to see Jeremy Webster. A haughty receptionist sat behind a semicircular desk, staring bleakly at the wretches who waited for her to lift a languid hand and say, "Mr. Webster won't be in until next week. Thank you all so much for waiting. . . ."

Illar presented the card Webster had given him and, after a phone call, the receptionist gave him a brief smile, and her permission to enter the inner sanctum. Webster was striding about his office when Illar came in, occasionally popping white tablets into his mouth. He wore a black flannel suit with a tattersall vest, and he looked fatigued and despairing. Dawn Evans was present too, seated in a deep armchair, her exquisitely slim legs crossed, and an expression of bland good humor on her face. Two or three other men drifted about the office, scripts in hand, watching Webster with worried frowns.

Illar waved to Dawn and she gave him a wide smile.

"It's nice to see you again," he said, because it was nice.

"Well, thanks," she said.

"Okay, okay," Webster said, facing them, hands on hips. "Todd, give 'em scripts. You kids are going to do a scene together. We'll give you time to run through it first."

A young man gave them narrow "sides," Webster told them what he expected of them, which, his tone indicated wasn't much, and then he and his staff withdrew. The doors closed, and Illar was alone with Dawn.

"Well," he said.

"This is going to be rough," she said, shaking her head and frowning. "I mean, this is just a little sliver of the play, and we're supposed to do something with it. I never understand plays very well anyway."

"I shouldn't worry too much about it," he said.

She laughed shakily. "You sound pretty confident."

"We shall see," he murmured. He sat down on a leather couch and looked at the script, memorizing it instantly, and, inferring from this one section the whole of

the play, how it began and ended, and what effect it was intended to produce on the audience. It was a strange business, actually. A little story, to be acted out before groups of people. Why? The story held a promise of hope, it hinted that somewhere ahead lay a chance for love, a gentle word, smiles and laughter. These types were the most primitive I've met, he thought, slightly touched by their plight. They hoped. They believed in happiness. They lacked the intelligence, apparently, to eliminate these illusions.

"I don't understand it," Dawn said, looking at him appealingly. "Take where I say I never loved any man but my father. And the guy tells me I really hated my father. What's all that?"

"Come here, Dawn. We'll run through it together."

Dawn sat beside him, the script in her lap, and sighed. She said humbly, "I'm not very bright, I guess."

That was perfectly true, he knew, but she was curiously attractive in spite of it. She was very slender and curvesome, and her skin was fair. Probably very soft to the touch. As soft as Tarina's? He cleared his throat. The late afternoon sunlight brought out deep lights in her honey-colored hair, and there was a small, placid pulse beat at the base of her slim white throat. Why did these things matter? It was that clumsy, ridiculous mating business, probably. Just how did they — He checked the thought sternly. Nothing could interest him less than studying the details of such monstrous improprieties. He cleared his throat again and crossed his legs.

With an effort he went back to the play. He explained it to her slowly, carefully, in terms she would perceive emotionally, and as he talked a glimmering of understanding came into her face. It was a sad little story, and when he finished her eyes were damp.

"Oh, it's so lovely," she said.

"Why? They all lost what they wanted."

"But they might have got it, don't you see?"

He did see, of course. This was hope and trust, the primordial optimism. But he couldn't feel it himself. If he felt this emotion he would be close to unhappiness, or happiness; which was impossible.

Webster came back then, looking even more morose and despairing, and sat on the edge of his desk. Two of his young men drifted in and stood by the walls. They watched Webster, and *their* expressions were morose and despairing. If he smiled they would smile; their faces were obedient as mirrors.

"Okay," Webster said. "Bore me."

They went through the scene. Dawn was not very expert; but she hit the right emotional values. Illar, however, cast a magic net over the room, and within it the three men were helplessly imprisoned. They became slaves staring mutely through barred windows at a patch of sunlight. They knew a grand hope, and a grand despair, and when Illar made his last speech, they were spiritually shattered.

Webster blew his nose. He dabbed at his eyes. His young men did the same. Then Webster came over and patted Illar's shoulder. "You're terrific, kid," he said. Then he looked at Dawn. "You'll do. With Pembroke, anybody'd do. Todd, contracts!"

Events moved rapidly from this point. Illar's days were taken up in rehearsals and at the costumers. He didn't need to rehearse, but it was expected of him. After rehearsals he and Dawn usually had a few drinks, and of these Illar was becoming very fond. He was also very fond of Dawn, but their relationship was as ideal as his relationship with Tarina. That is, it was completely cerebral. Which was ideal, he frequently told himself sternly. Tarina, meanwhile, had moved to a hotel suite which overlooked Central Park. She spent her days in reckless buying binges at the swankiest coutouriers, and at the beauty shops. She had made a fitful effort to develop the mind of this body she wore, but it was a forced interest. She was only interested in the body. And of this she took excellent care. She had manicures, pedicures, facial massages, hair rinses, and permanents. She wore mud packs, she had her legs waxed, she sat in steam cabinets, she dieted and exercised, until she glowed delicately with health and beauty. Her clothes were fabulous, and she caused an audible ripple of masculine approval as she whisked through the lobby of the hotel. But she knew nothing approaching satisfaction. There was a gnawing hunger inside this body of hers which nothing assuaged. She was restless and impatient, irritable and temperamental.

It was an affliction which she understood and loathed.

She longed for the shining silver sphere, the disembodied existence, the tranquil passivity of her life with Illar.

The play opened and was an immediate hit. The critics loved everything about it, and particularly Illar's performance.

"*A happy choice . . . A new luminary . . . One of the finest portrayals . . . Mr. Pembroke's gifts are astounding. . . .*"

Thus ran the notices.

There was a party for the cast after the opening and Illar was

innundated with praise and champagne. He returned to his suite early in the morning, his top hat set at a precarious angle on his head, and waving a sheaf of notices in his hand.

"Dear, I am fabulous," he said, beaming at Tarina.

She was dressed for bed, and wore only a peach-colored negligee over her nightgown. "You're ridiculous," she said coldly.

He blinked at her. "Ward Morehouse calls me a new and dynamic force in the theater. George Jean Nathan insists that I am greater —"

"Oh, stop, stop, *stop*," Tarina cried, pressing her hands to her ears. "You believe that drivel. What's more you think it's important."

"Well, it's a bit fulsome, perhaps, but —"

"It makes no difference. You've suddenly adopted the values of these primitives. You want to be liked and flattered. You want approval. It's — it's disgusting. When are we going back?"

He frowned now, his benign good humor fading. "But I've got a run-of-the-play contract," he said.

"What difference does that make? They can replace you."

"Oh, I'm not so sure."

"You ass!" she said bitterly.

"All right, we'll go back as soon as I can get someone to take over," he shouted, thoroughly angry and hurt now. "Did you think I wanted to stay here?"

Tarina breathed easier. She *had* been afraid of that, even though she knew it was impossible and preposterous. But Illar had been acting oddly . . .

"Very well, let's not discuss it any further," she said. "We're going back soon, so there's no point in this undignified acrimony." They would go back, she knew. They never lied to each other; they couldn't. Illar was committed to return now; nothing could prevent that. "I'm going to bed. Good night," she said.

"Don't you want to look at these notices? You might find them amusing."

"The possibility is remote," she said drily, and slipped out of her robe. "Good night."

"I shall see you tomorrow."

"Where are you going?"

"Out!" Illar said.

He went to a bar and drank whisky for several hours, and his capacity caused the bartender's eyebrows to go up a respectful notch. Then he cabbed across town to Dawn's hotel, and went up to her room. He wasn't sure what he planned to do; he didn't know enough about himself, or of women, to make plans. Let nature take its course, he thought foggily.

Dawn opened the door, holding a robe together at her waist and blinking with sleep.

"Why, Pembroke," she said. "Come on in. Been celebrating, eh?"

"That's the year's understatement," Illar said. He closed the door and took her in his arms.

"What's all this?" she said in a good humored voice.

She was soft and warm to his touch, and her body snuggled compatibly against his; there was no problem really, he knew.

"I want you," he said.

She raised her eyes and looked at him gravely. "Okay," she said, after a short pause. "I like you, and I'd be a heel to say no. You're the only thing keeping me in that show."

"That's got nothing to do with it," he said irritably.

"I know. I'm a spoil sport, I guess."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, this sounds awfully corny, Pembroke, but I don't love you."

"What difference does that make?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Are you trying to say that it isn't good unless the parties love each other?"

She giggled. "That's the way a lawyer would put it, I guess. Seriously, Pembroke, I don't know about other people. But that's the way it is with me."

He dropped his arms, dispirited and discouraged. "Is love that important?"

"I guess so. My God, look at all the songs they write about it?" She looked up into his moody, troubled face, and sighed. "Well, I'm a real bitch, I guess. I owe it to you, and still I make with all this hearts-and-flowers talk."

"No, no, you don't owe me anything," Illar said. "I — I just don't understand."

"Well, you love that girl you live with, don't you?"

Love Tarina? The thought was preposterous, but, curiously, not repulsive. "I suppose so," he said, because he didn't want to admit his ignorance. "But love means different things to different people. What does it mean to you?"

She laughed and flopped down on the edge of the bed. "I'm a screwball about things like that," she said. "I loved a guy once because he frowned when he read the funny papers. Can you beat that?"

"It's — illogical."

"Sure. I used to sit and giggle at him while he read the funnies on Sunday morning, and he'd tell me to shut up, glaring at me, and I'd go on laughing. Then he'd get mad and come over to teach me some manners, and somehow he'd forget all about giving me a spanking, and we'd be better friends than ever in a little while."

"What happened to him?"

"He walked out. With a wait-

ress. They run a gas station and lunch counter out west somewhere."

Illar looked down at her for a few seconds, disturbed and miserable, and then he patted her on the head and walked out of the room.

He didn't understand any of this, what she'd told him, or his own feelings. Was it possible, he wondered, that these people existed on a plane below the reach of his intelligence?

After this crisis Illar became a headache to everyone connected with the show.

Webster tried to talk to him, but got nowhere. He respected Illar's genius, and understood what he thought to be swellheadedness. He let Illar have his way, hoping he'd snap out of it, and meanwhile looked around for another lead. It was that, or close the show, and he didn't want to close the show for the excellent reason that it was playing to SRO.

Illar drank heavily, taking a perverse delight in this primitive habit, and treated Tarina with cold indifference.

Tarina's composure was shaken. Once, it had been enough to know that soon they would leave, that soon they would be back in their silent, shining sphere, but now she wondered what *that* would be like. Here she could at least shop and buy clothes when he was in a particularly vile temper, but how would it be when they were locked together once again in their unassailable prison? He'd change, of course; but supposing he didn't? The implications in that were frightening.

And so, casting about wildly for assurance, she called Jeremy Webster and asked if she could see him. He was surprised to hear from her, but told her to come over to his apartment.

"I'll split a benzedrine tablet with you," he said.

Webster's apartment was the penthouse of a hotel in the Fifties. From the terrace, where dinner was served, they had a splendid view of the city, laced lengthwise with gleaming threads of traffic. They stood together, drinks in hand, and looked out into the night.

"This used to be my apple," Webster said. "Now only the core is left." He grinned sadly at her. "Watch it, you'll fall into a cynical cesspool if you stick around here. You want to talk about Pembroke, eh? That's my fate. Glamorous women tell me about their husbands now. They used to deny they were married. Well, what goes?"

"I don't know."

"Well, he's got an occupational disease known as big-headitis. It hits us all, I'm afraid. And he drinks."

"But why?"

Webster looked at her sharply. "Look, I'm a simple guy at heart. I make two hundred thousand a year, and I keep a sleep-in psychiatrist the way a failure would have a sleep-in valet. The psychiatrist tells me how I am in the morning. He's never wrong. He always says lousy. But I stray. The point is, in spite of my fancy background, I'm a simple guy. I look for simple answers. And when a guy behaves like Pembroke I decide that he ain't getting —" He stopped as Tarina's cheeks began to burn.

"I embarrass you?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"Well — no."

"That's too bad. I thought I had our answer for a second. Well, put it this way. A guy who starts blowing off energy the way Pembroke is doing, is a guy whose release valve ain't working right. He ain't living normally. There's nothing missing. There's something he ain't getting. Okay. Now what's Pembroke missing? What ain't he getting?"

"You mean —?" She couldn't use the words.

"Yeah, I guess I do," Webster said slowly. "Look, what did you do today?"

"What?"

"Answer my question."

"Well, lots of things."

"Tell me."

"I had breakfast, I showered, I went to the beauty salon. I shopped. I came home. I — Pembroke was there, in a very disagreeable mood."

"What did you do at the beauty parlor?"

"I — I had a facial, and I had my legs waxed."

"What did you shop for?"

"Well, some perfume, some bath powders, I think. And some nighties."

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why buy perfume and bath powder, and have your legs waxed, and all the rest of it? What's the sense of buying things that don't get used?"

"That's a disgusting idea."

"Poor Pembroke," Webster said, shaking his head. "No wonder he drinks."

"But do you seriously think that —" She blushed violently. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but that wasn't what embarrassed her. What embarrassed her, and sent a shivery hot and cold tremor from her head to toes, was the realization that the words, and their implications, were suddenly rather heady and delicious. She wanted to use them; they didn't repulse or frighten her anymore.

Webster grinned and looked at his watch. "The show breaks at eleven twenty. I'll see that Pembroke goes right home. You'll be there?"

"Yes, yes."

Illar came into the bedroom of their suite at a quarter of twelve. One bedside lamp glowed softly. Tarina lay under a silken sheet which had molded itself to the graceful lines of her body. She smiled at Illar.

"Webster said you wanted to see me," Illar said.

"I was lonesome."

"For what?"

"You."

He sat on the edge of the bed, frowning faintly. She put her hands under her head and her legs moved under the light coverlet.

"Give me a kiss," she said.

He felt as clumsy as a schoolboy. "I've never kissed anyone," he said.

"Neither have I."

"You won't laugh if I don't do it right?"

She giggled. "How would I know?"

He kissed her tentatively at first, and then with more authority. Her arms went around him and pulled him closer to her, and after a while he turned out the light.

Illar and Tarina were supremely good at anything they put their minds to, and that night they put their minds to the problem at hand with rare efficiency and enthusiasm. . . .

The next morning he looked into her smiling face and shook his head slowly.

"Do you imagine — do you suppose it's the same with all of them?"

"I don't see why not."

He knew the answer to the question he had asked himself when he had left Dawn's room. These people weren't below the reach of his intelligence; they were above it.

"One thing, darling," he said, and his voice was suddenly grave. "If we had, well, a child, we could never go back. It would be human. It couldn't come with us, of course."

"You want to go back, naturally."

"But certainly," he said, in a very confident voice. "We're going on tour in a few months, and I'll have to accompany the show, but after that —"

"There may be movie offers."

"Yes, I can see a few delays, but —"

"But we'll definitely go back?"

"Surely. That is, if you're smart about — well, that other thing I mentioned."

"I'll be very smart," she said.

He grinned at her and kissed her on the lips. After a bit he said, in a worried voice, "Do you suppose, I mean, well, does the time make any difference? Do they — well all the time?"

"I'm sure they do," she said.

She felt very smart as she lay beside him, smart enough in fact to be very dumb.

MOTHER BY PROTEST

By RICHARD MATHESON

This is a delicate story about a delicate subject, or possibly we should say a daring story about a daring subject. But then again, maybe not. In this day and age it's hard to judge what's daring and what isn't. Anyhow, the period of gestation in all biological entities — including homo sapiens — is definitely established. So, when David got home from his trip and found things the way they were, all he had to do was make a few fast mathematical calculations and — well, go straight through the roof! On the basis of every known law on the subject, Ann was lying like a trooper. But with everything moving so fast nowadays, what can a man believe? There are laws and there are — possibilities.

In the hall he put down his suitcase. "How have you been?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, with a smile.

She helped him off with his coat and hat and put them in the hall closet.

"This Indiana January sure feels cold after six months in South America."

"I bet it does," she said.

They walked into the living-room, arms around each other.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" he asked.

"Oh . . . not too much," she said. "Thinking about you."

He smiled and hugged her.

"That's a lot," he said.

Her smile flickered a moment, then returned. She held his hand tightly. And, suddenly, although he didn't realize it at first, she was wordless. He'd gone over this moment in his mind so often that the sharpness of its anti-climax

later struck him. She smiled and looked into his eyes while he spoke but the smile kept fading and her eyes kept evading his at the very moments he wanted their attention most.

Later in the kitchen she sat across from him as he drank the third cup of her hot, rich coffee.

"I won't sleep tonight," he said, grinning, "but I don't want to."

Her smile was only obliging. The coffee burned his throat and he noticed she wasn't drinking any of the first cup she'd poured for herself.

"No coffee for you?" he asked.

"No, I . . . I don't drink it anymore."

"On a diet or something?"

He saw her throat move.

"Sort of," she said.

"That's silly," he said. "Your figure is perfect."

She seemed about to say something. Then she hesitated. He put down his cup.

"Ann, is . . ."

"Something wrong?" she finished.

He nodded.

She lowered her eyes. She bit her lower lip and clasped her hands before her on the table. Then her eyes closed and he got the feeling that she was shutting herself away from something hopelessly terrible.

"Honey, what *is* it?"

"I guess . . . the best way is to just . . . just up and *tell* you."

"Well, of course, sweetheart," he said anxiously. "What is it? Did something happen while I was gone?"

"Yes. And no."

"I don't understand."

She was looking at him suddenly. The look was haunted and it made him shudder.

"I'm going to have a baby," she said.

He was about to cry out — but that's wonderful! He was about to jump up and embrace her and dance her around the room.

Then it hit him, driving the color from his face.

"What?" he said.

She didn't answer because she knew he'd heard.

"How . . . long have you known?" he asked, watching her eyes hold motionless on his face.

She drew in a shaking breath and he knew her answer would be the wrong one. It was.

"Three weeks," she said.

He sat there looking blankly at her and stirring the coffee without realizing. Then he noticed and, slowly, he drew out the spoon and put it down beside the cup.

He tried to say the word but he couldn't. It trembled in his vocal chords. He tensed himself.

"Who?" he asked her, his voice toneless and weak.

Her eyes were black on him,

Illustrator: Ray Houlihan

her face ashen. Her lips trembled when she told him.

She said, "No one."

"*What?*"

"David," she said carefully, "I . . ."

Then her shoulders slumped.

"No one, David. No one."

It took a moment for the reaction to hit him. She saw it on his face before he turned it away from her. Then she stood up and looked down at him, her voice shaking.

"David, I swear to God I never had anything to do with any man while you were gone!"

He sank back numbly against the chair back. God, oh God, what could he say? A man comes back from six months in the jungle and his wife tells him she's pregnant and asks him to believe that . . .

His teeth set on edge. He felt as if he were involved in the beginning of some hideously smutty joke. He swallowed and looked down at his trembling hands. Ann, Ann! He wanted to pick up his cup and hurl it against the wall.

"David, you've got to bel —"

He stumbled up and out of the room. She was behind him quickly, clutching for his hand.

"David, you've *got* to believe me. I'll go insane if you don't. It's the only strength that's kept me going — the hope that you'd believe me. If you don't . . ."

Her words broke off and they stared bleakly at each other. He felt her hand holding his. Cold.

"Ann, what do you want me to believe? That my child was conceived five months after I left you?"

"David, if I were guilty would I . . . be so *open* in telling you? You know how I feel about our marriage. About you."

Her voice lowered.

"If I'd done what you think I've done, I wouldn't tell you," she said, "I'd kill myself."

He kept looking helplessly at her as if the answer lay in her anxious face. Finally he spoke.

"We'll . . . go to Doctor Kleinman," he said. "We'll . . ."

Her hand dropped away from his.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

His voice was tortured.

"You know what you're asking of me, don't you?" he said. "Don't you, Ann? I'm a scientist. I can't accept the incredible . . . just like that. Don't you think I *want* to believe you? But . . ."

She stood before him a long time. Then she turned away a little and her voice was well controlled.

"All right," she said quietly, "do what you think is best."

Then she walked out of the room. He watched her go. Then he turned and walked slowly to the mantel. He stood looking at the kewpie doll sitting there with

its legs hanging down over the edge. *Coney Island* read the words on her dress. They'd won it on their honeymoon trip eight years before.

His eyes fell shut suddenly.

Homecoming.

The word was a dead word now.

"Now that the welcomes are done for," said Doctor Kleinman, "what are you doing here? Catch a bug in the jungle?"

Collier sat slumped in the chair. For a few seconds he glanced out the window. Then he turned back to Kleinman and told him quickly.

When he'd finished they looked at each other for a silent moment.

"It's *not* possible, is it?" Collier said then.

Kleinman pressed his lips together. A grim smile flickered briefly on his face.

"What can I say?" he said. "No, it's impossible? No, not as far as observation goes? I do not know, David. We assume that the sperms survive in the cervix canal no more than three to five days, maybe a little longer. But, even if they do . . ."

"They can't fertilize," Collier finished.

Kleinman didn't nod or answer but Collier knew the answer. Knew it in simple words that were pronouncing doom on his life.

"There's no hope then," he said quietly.

Kleinman pressed his lips together again and ran a reflective finger along the edge of his letter opener.

"Unless," he said, "it is to speak to Ann and make her understand you will not desert her. It is probably fear which makes her speak as she does."

". . . will not desert her," Collier echoed in an inaudible whisper and shook his head.

"I suggest nothing, mind you," Kleinman went on. "Only that it is possible Ann is too hysterically frightened to tell you the truth."

Collier rose, drained of vitality.

"All right," he said indecisively, "I'll speak to her again. Maybe we can . . . work it out."

But when he told her what Kleinman had said she just sat in the chair and looked at him without expression on her face.

"And that's it," she said. "You've decided."

He swallowed.

"I don't think you know what you're asking of me," he said.

"Yes, I know what I'm asking," she answered. "Just that you believe in me."

He started to speak in rising anger, then checked himself.

"Ann," he said, "just *tell* me. I'll do my best to understand."

Now she was losing temper too. He watched her hands tighten, then tremble on her lap.

"I hate to spoil your noble scene," she said. "But I'm not pregnant by another man. Do you

understand me — believe me?"

She wasn't hysterical now or frightened or on the defensive. He stood there looking down at her, feeling numb and confused. She never had lied to him before and yet . . . what was he to think?

She went back to her reading then and he kept standing and watching her. These are the facts, his mind insisted. He turned away from her. Did he really know Ann? Was it possible she was something entirely strange to him now? Those six months.

What had happened during those six months?

He stood making up the living-room couch with sheets and the old comforter they had used when they were first married. As he looked down at the thick quilting and the gaudy patterns now faded from innumerable washings, a grim smile touched his lips.

Homecoming.

He straightened up with a tired sigh and walked over to where the record player scratched gently. He lifted the arm up and put on the next record. He looked at the inside cover of the album as Tschaikowsky's *Swan Lake* started.

To my very own darling. Ann.

They hadn't spoken all afternoon or evening. After supper she'd gotten a book from the case and gone upstairs. He'd sat in the living room trying to read *The Fort Tribune*, trying even harder to relax. Yet how could he? Could a man relax in his home with his wife who carried a child that wasn't his? The newspaper had finally slipped from his lax fingers and fallen to the floor.

Now he sat staring endlessly at the rug, trying to figure it out.

Was it possible the doctors were wrong? Could the life cell exist and maintain its fertilizing capacity for, not days, but months? Maybe, he thought, he'd rather believe that than believe Ann could commit adultery. Theirs had always been an ideal relationship, as close an approximation of The Perfect Marriage as one could allow possible. Now this.

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. Breath shuddered through him and there was a tightness in his chest he could not relieve. A man comes home from six months in the . . .

Put it out of your mind! — he ordered himself, then forced himself to pick up the paper and read every word in it including comics and the astrology column. *You will receive a big surprise today*, the syndicated seer told him.

He flung down the paper and looked at the mantel clock. After ten. He'd been sitting there over an hour while Ann sat up in bed reading. He wondered what book was taking the place of affection and understanding.

He rose wearily. The record player was scratching again.

After brushing his teeth he went out into the hall and started for the stairs. At the bedroom door he hesitated, glanced in. The light was out. He stopped and listened to her breathing and knew she wasn't asleep.

He almost started in as a rushing sense of need for her covered him. But then he remembered that she was going to have a baby and it couldn't possibly be his baby. The thought made him stiffen. It turned him around, thin-lipped, and took him down the stairs and he slapped down the wall switch to plunge the living room into darkness.

He felt for the couch and sank down on it. He sat for a while in the dark smoking a cigarette. Then he pressed the stub into an ashtray and lay back. The room was cold. He climbed under the sheets and comforter and lay there shivering. *Homecoming*. The word oppressed him again.

He must have slept a little while, he thought, staring up at the black ceiling. He held up his watch and looked at the luminous hands. Three twenty. He grunted and rolled onto his side. Then he raised up and shook the pillow to puff it up.

He lay there thinking of her. Six months away and here, on the first night home, he was on the living room couch while she lay upstairs in bed. He wondered if she were frightened. She still had a little fear of the darkness left over from her childhood. She used to hug against him and press her cheek against his shoulder and go to sleep with a happy sigh.

He tortured himself thinking about it. More than anything else he wanted to rush up the stairs and crawl in beside her, feel her warm body against him. Why don't you? asked his sleepy mind. Because she's carrying someone else's child, came the obedient answer. Because she's sinned.

He twisted his head impatiently on the pillow. Sinned. The word sounded ridiculous. He rolled onto his back again and reached for a cigarette. He lay there smoking slowly, watching the glowing tip move in the blackness.

It was no use. He sat up swiftly and fumbled for the ashtray. He had to have it out with her, that was all. If he reasoned with her, she'd tell him what had happened. Then they'd have something to go on. It was better that way.

Rationalization, said his mind. He ignored it as he trudged up the icy steps and hesitated outside the bedroom.

He went in slowly, trying to remember how the furniture was placed. He found the small nightlamp on the bureau and turned

the knob. The tiny glow pushed away darkness from itself.

He shivered under his heavy robe. The room was freezing, all the windows open wide. But, as he turned, he saw Ann lying there clad only in a thin silk nightgown. He moved quickly to the bed and pulled the bedclothes up over her, trying not to look at her body. Not now, he thought, not at a time like this. It would distort everything.

He stood over the bed and watched her sleep. Her hair was spread darkly over the pillow. He looked at her white skin, her soft red lips. She's a beautiful woman, he almost spoke the words aloud.

He turned his head away. All right, the word was ridiculous but it was true. What else would you call the betrayal of marriage? Was there a better word than sinned?

His lips tightened. He was remembering how she'd always wanted a baby. Well, she had one now.

He noticed the book next to her on the bed and picked it up. *Basic Physics*. What on earth was she reading that for? She'd never shown the remotest interest in the sciences except for perhaps a little sociology, a smattering of anthropology. He looked down curiously at her.

He wanted to wake her up but he couldn't. He knew he'd be struck dumb as soon as her eyes opened. I've been thinking, I want to discuss this sensibly, his mind prompted. It sounded like a soap opera line.

That was the crux of it, the fact that he was incapable of discussing it with her sensibly or not. He couldn't leave her, neither could he thrash it out as he'd planned. He felt a tightening of anger at his vacillation. Well, he defended angrily, how can a man adjust to such a circumstance? A man comes home from six months in . . .

He moved back from the bed and sank down on the small chair that stood beside the bureau. He sat there shivering a little and watching her face. It was such a childlike face, so innocent.

As he watched she stirred in her sleep, writhing uncomfortably under the blankets. A whimper moved her lips, then, suddenly, her right hand reached up and heaved the blankets aside so that they slid off the edge of the bed. Her feet kicked them away completely. Then a great sigh trembled her body and she rolled onto her side and slept, despite the shivering that began almost immediately.

Again he stood, dismayed at her actions. She'd never been a restless sleeper. Was it a habit she'd acquired while he was gone? It's guilt — his mind said, disconcertingly. He twitched at the in-

furiating idea and, walking over to the bed, he tossed the blankets over her roughly.

When he straightened up he saw that her eyes were on him. He started to smile, then wrenched it from his lips.

"You're going to get pneumonia if you keep throwing off the bedclothes," he said irritably.

She blinked. "What?" she said.

"I *said* . . ." he started, then stopped. There was too much anger piling up in him. He fought it off.

"You're kicking off the blankets," he said, in a flat voice.

"Oh," she said, "I . . . I've been doing it for about a week now."

He looked at her. What now? — the thought came.

"Would you get me a drink of water?" she asked.

He nodded, glad for the excuse to take his eyes from her. He padded into the hall and bathroom and ran the water until it got cold, then filled up the glass.

"Thank you," she said softly as he handed it to her.

"Welcome."

She drank all of it in one swallow, then looked up guiltily.

"Would you . . . mind getting me another one?"

He looked at her for a moment, then took the glass and brought her another drink. She drank it just as quickly.

"What have you been eating?" he asked, feeling a strange tightness at finally talking to her but about such an irrelevant topic.

"Salt . . . I guess," she said.

"You must have had an awful lot."

"I have, David."

"That's not good."

"I know." She looked at him imploringly.

"What do you want — *another* glass?" he asked.

She lowered her eyes. He shrugged. He didn't think it was right but he didn't care to argue about it. He went to the bathroom and got her the third drink. When he got back her eyes were closed. He said, "Here's your water," but she was asleep. He put down the glass.

As he watched her he almost felt an uncontrollable desire to lie beside her, hold her close and kiss her lips and face. He thought of all the nights he'd lain awake in the sweltering tent thinking about Ann. Rolling his head on the pillow almost in agony because she was so far away. He had the same feeling now. And yet, although he stood beside her, he couldn't touch her.

Turning abruptly, he snapped off the nightlamp and left the bedroom. He went downstairs and threw himself down on the couch and dared his brain not to fall asleep. His brain conceded and he fell into a blank, uneasy slumber.

When she came into the kitchen the next morning she was coughing and sneezing.

"What did you do, throw off the blankets again?" he said.

"Again?" she asked.

"Don't you remember me coming up there?"

She looked at him blankly.

"No," she said.

They looked at each other for a moment. Then he went to the cupboard and took out two cups.

"Can you drink coffee?" he asked.

She hesitated a moment. Then she said, "Yes."

He put the cups down on the table, then sat down and waited. When the coffee started spurting up into the glass dome of the pot, Ann stood and picked up a potholder. Collier watched her pour the black, steaming fluid into the cups. Her hand shook a little as she poured his cup and he shrank back to avoid getting splashed.

He waited until she was sitting down, then asked grumpily, "What are you reading *Basic Physics* for?"

Again the blank, uncertain look.

"I don't know," she said. "It just . . . caught my interest for some reason."

He spooned sugar into his coffee and stirred, hearing her pour cream into hers.

"I . . . thought you . . ." He took a breath. "I thought you had to drink skimmed milk. Or something," he said.

"I felt like a cup of coffee."

"I see."

He sat there looking morosely at the table, drinking the burning coffee in slow sips. He forced himself to sink into a dull, edgeless cloud. He almost forgot she was there. The room disappeared, all its sights and sounds falling away.

Then her cup banged down. He started.

"If you're not going to talk to me, we might as well end it right now!" she said angrily. "If you think I'm going to stick around until you feel like talking to me, you're wrong!"

"What would you like me to do!" he flared back. "If you found out I'd fathered some other woman's child, how would *you* feel?"

She closed her eyes and a look of strained patience held her face tautly.

"Listen, David," she said, "for the last time, *I have not committed adultery*. I know it spoils your role of the injured spouse but I can't help that. You can make me swear on a hundred Bibles and I'll still tell you the same thing. You can put truth serum in me and I'll tell you the same thing. You can strap me to a lie detector and my story will still be the same. David, I'm . . . !"

She couldn't finish. A spasm of

coughing began shaking her body. Her face darkened and tears ran down her cheeks as she gripped the side of the table with whitened fingers, gasping for breath.

For a moment he forgot everything except that she was in pain. He jumped up and ran to the sink for water. Then he patted her back gently while she drank. She thanked him in a choking voice. He patted her back once more, almost longingly.

"You'd better stay in bed today," he said, "that's a bad cough you have. And I'd . . . you'd better pin down the blankets so you don't . . ."

"David, what are you going to do?" she asked unhappily.

"Do?"

She didn't explain.

"I'm . . . not sure, Ann," he said. "I want with all my heart to believe you. But . . ."

"But you can't. Well, that's that."

"Oh, *stop* jumping to conclusions! Can't you give me some time to work it out? For God's sake, I've only been home one day."

For a brief moment he thought he saw something of the old warmth in her eyes. Maybe she could see, behind his anger, how much he wanted to stay. She picked up her coffee.

"Work it out then," she said. "*I* know what the truth is. If you don't believe me . . . then work it out your own clever way."

"Thank you," he said.

When he left the house she was back in bed, bundled up warmly, coughing and reading avidly, *An Introduction To Chemistry.*

"Dave!"

Professor Mead's studious face broke into a grin. He put down the tweezers he'd been moving the microscope slide with and shoved out his right hand. Johnny Mead, former All-American quarterback, was twenty-seven, tall and broad, sporting a perpetual crewcut. He held Collier's hand in a firm grip.

"How's it been, boy?" he asked. "Had enough of those Matto Grosso vermin?"

"More than enough," Collier said, smiling.

"You're looking good, Dave," Mead said. "Nice and tan. You must make quite a sight around this campus of leprous-skinned faculty."

They moved across the wide laboratory toward Mead's office, passing students bent over their microscopes and working the testing instruments. Collier got a momentary feeling of return, then lost it in the irony that he should get the feeling here and not at home.

Mead closed the door and waved Collier to a chair.

"Well, tell me all about it, Dave," he said. "Your daring exploits in the tropics."

Collier cleared his throat.

"Well, if you don't mind, Johnny," he said, "there's something else I want to talk to you about now."

"Fire away, boy."

Collier hesitated.

"Understand now," he said, "I'm telling you this under strictest confidence and only because I consider you my best friend."

Mead leaned forward in his chair, the look of youthful exuberance fading as he saw that Collier was worried.

Collier told him.

"No, Dave," Johnny said when he was finished.

"Listen, Johnny," Collier went on, "I know it sounds crazy. But she's insisted so forcibly that she's innocent that . . . well, frankly, I'm at a loss. Either she's had such an emotional breakdown that her mind has rejected the memory of . . . of . . ."

His hands stirred helplessly in his lap.

"Or?" Johnny said.

Collier took a deep breath.

"Or else she's telling the truth," he said.

"But . . ."

"I know, I know," Collier said. "I've been to our doctor. Kleinman, you know him."

Johnny nodded.

"Well, I've been to him and he said the same thing you don't have to say. That it's impossible for a woman to become pregnant five months after intercourse. I know that but . . ."

"What?"

"Isn't there some other way?"

Johnny looked at him without speaking. Collier's head dropped forward and his eyes closed. After a moment he made a sound of bitter amusement.

"Isn't there some other way," he mocked himself. "What a stupid question."

"She insists she's had no . . ."

Collier nodded wearily.

"Yes," he said. "She . . . Yes."

"I don't know," Johnny said, running the tip of a forefinger over his lower lip. "Maybe she's hysterical. Maybe . . . David, *maybe she isn't pregnant at all.*"

"What!"

Collier's head snapped up, his eyes looking eagerly into Johnny's.

"Don't jump the gun, Dave. I don't want that on my conscience. But, well . . . hasn't Ann always wanted a baby? I think she has — wanted it bad. Well . . . it may be just a crazy theory but I think it's possible that the emotional . . . *drain* of being separated from you for six months could cause a false pregnancy."

A wild hope began to surge in Collier, irrational he knew but one he clutched at, desperately.

"I think you should talk to her again," Johnny said. "Try to

get more information from her. Maybe even do what she suggests and try hypnosis, truth serum, anything. But . . . *boy*, don't give up! I *know* Ann. And I trust her."

As he half ran down the street he kept thinking how little credit was due him for finding the trust he needed. But, at least, thank God, he had it for now. It filled him with hope, it made him want to cry out — it has to be true, it *has* to be!

Then, as he turned into the path of the house, he stopped so quickly that he almost fell forward and his breath drew in with a gasp.

Ann was standing on the porch in her nightgown, an icy January wind whipping the fragile silk around the full contours of her body. She stood on the frost-covered boards in her bare feet, one hand on the railing.

"*Oh, my God,*" muttered Collier in a strangled voice as he raced up the path to grab her.

Her flesh was bluish and like ice when he caught her and when he looked into her wide, staring eyes, a bolt of panic drove through him.

He half led, half dragged her into the warm living room and set her down in the easy chair before the fireplace. Her teeth were chattering and breath passed her lips in wheezing gasps. His hands shook as he ran around frantically getting blankets, plugging in the heating pad and placing it under her icy feet, breaking up wood with frenzied motions and starting a fire, making hot coffee.

Finally, when he'd done everything he could, he knelt before her and held her frigid hands in his. And, as he listened to the shivering of her body reflected in her breath, a sense of utter anguish wrenched at his insides.

"Ann, Ann, what's the *matter* with you?" he almost sobbed. "Are you out of your mind?"

She tried to answer but couldn't. She huddled beneath the blankets, her eyes pleading with him.

"You don't have to talk, sweetheart," he said. "It's all right."

"I . . . I . . . I . . . h-*had to go out,*" she said.

And that was all. He stayed there before her, his eyes never leaving her face. And, even though she was shaking and gripped by painful seizures of coughing, she seemed to realize his faith in her because she smiled at him and, in her eyes, he saw that she was happy.

By supper time she had a raging fever. He put her in bed and gave her nothing to eat but all the water she wanted. Her temperature fluctuated, her flushed, burning skin becoming cold and clammy in almost seconds.

Collier called Kleinman about six and the doctor arrived fifteen

minutes later. He went directly to the bedroom and checked Ann. His face became grave and he motioned Collier into the hall.

"We must get her to the hospital," he said quietly.

Then he went downstairs and phoned for an ambulance. Collier went back in to the bedside and stood there holding her limp hand, looking down at her closed eyes, her feverish skin. Hospital, he thought, oh my God, the hospital.

Then a strange thing happened.

Kleinman returned and beckoned once more for Collier to come out in the hall. They stood there talking until the downstairs bell rang. Then Collier went down to let them in and the two orderlies and the interne followed him up the stairs carrying their stretcher.

They found Kleinman standing by the bed staring down at Ann in speechless amazement.

Collier ran to him.

"What is it!" he cried.

Kleinman lifted his head slowly.

"She is cured," he said in awed tones.

"What?"

The interne moved quickly to the bed. Kleinman spoke to him and to Collier.

"The fever is gone," he said. "Her temperature, her respiration, her pulse beat — all are normal. She has been completely cured of pneumonia in . . ."

He checked his pocket watch.

"*In seventeen minutes,*" he said.

Collier sat in Kleinman's waiting room staring sightlessly at the magazine in his lap. Inside, Ann was being x-rayed.

There was no doubt anymore, Ann was pregnant. X-rays at six weeks had shown the fetus inside her. Once more their relationship suffered from doubt. He was still concerned for her health but, once more, was unable to speak to her and tell her that he believed in her. And, though he'd never actually told her of his renewed doubt, Ann had felt it. She avoided him at home, sleeping half the time, the other half reading omniverously. He still couldn't understand that. She'd gone through all his books on the physical sciences, then his texts on sociology, anthropology, philosophy, semantics, history and now she was reading geography books. There seemed no sense to it.

And, all during this period, while the form in her body changed from a small lump to a pear shape, to a globe, then an ovoid — she'd been eating an excess of salt. Doctor Kleinman kept warning her about it. Collier had tried to stop her but she wouldn't stop. Eating salt seemed a compulsion.

As a result she drank too much water. Now her weight had come to the point where the over-size fetus was pressing against her diaphragm causing breathing difficulty.

Just yesterday Ann's face had gone blue and Collier had rushed her to Kleinman's office. The doctor had done something to ease the condition, Collier didn't know what. Then Ann had been x-rayed and Kleinman told Collier to bring her back the next day.

The door opened and Kleinman led Ann out of his office.

"Sit, my dear," he told her. "I want to talk to David."

Ann walked past Collier without looking at him and sat down on the leather couch. As he stood, he noticed her reaching for a magazine. *The Scientific American.* He sighed and shook his head as he walked into Kleinman's office.

As he moved for the chair, he thought, for what seemed the hundredth time, of the night she'd cried and told him she had to stay because there was no place else to go. Because she had no money of her own and her family was dead. She'd told him that if it wasn't for the fact that she was innocent she'd probably kill herself for the way he was treating her. He had stood beside the bed, silent and tense, while she cried, unable to argue, to console, even to reply. He'd just stood there until he could bear it no longer and then walked out of the room.

"What?" he said.

"I say look at these," Kleinman said grimly.

Kleinman's behavior had changed too in the past months, declining from confidence to a sort of confused anger.

Collier looked down at the two x-ray plates, glanced at the dates on them. One was from the day before, the other was the plate Kleinman had just taken.

"I don't . . ." Collier started.

Kleinman told him, "Look at the size of the child."

Collier compared the plates more carefully. At first he didn't see. Then his startled eyes flicked up suddenly.

"Is it possible?" he said, feeling a crushing sense of the unreal on him.

"It has happened," was all Kleinman said.

"But . . . *how?*"

Kleinman shook his head and Collier saw the doctor's left hand on the desk grip into a fist as if he were angered by this new enigma.

"I have never seen the like of it," Kleinman said. "Complete bone structure by the seventh week. Facial form by the eighth week. Organs complete and functioning by the end of the second month. The mother's insane desire for salt. And now this . . ."

He picked up the plates and looked at them almost in belligerence.

"How can a child *decrease* its size?" he said.

Collier felt a pang of fear at the mystified tone in Kleinman's voice.

"It is clear, it is clear," Kleinman shook his head irritably. "The child had grown to excess proportions because of the mother drinking too much water. To such proportions that it was pressing dangerously against her diaphragm. And now, in *one* day, the pressure is gone, the size of the child markedly decreased.

Kleinman's hands snapped into hard fists.

"It is almost," he said nervously, "as if the child knows what is going on."

"No more salt!"

His voice rose in pitch as he jerked the salt shaker from her hand and stamped over to the cupboard. Then he took her glass of water and emptied most of it into the sink. He sat down again.

She sat with her eyes shut, her body trembling. He watched as tears ran slowly from her eyes and down her cheeks. Her teeth bit into her lower lip. Then her eyes opened; they were big, frightened eyes. She caught a sob in the middle and hastily brushed her tears aside. She sat there quietly.

"Sorry," she murmured and, for some reason, Collier got the impression that she wasn't talking to him.

She finished the remaining water in a gulp.

"You're drinking too much water again," he said. "You know what Doctor Kleinman said."

"I . . . try," she said, "But I can't help it. I feel such a need for salt and it makes me so thirsty."

"You'll have to stop drinking so much water," he said coldly. "You'll endanger the child."

She looked startled as her body twitched suddenly. Her hands slipped from the table to press against her swollen stomach. Her look implored him to help her.

"What is it?" he asked hurriedly.

"I don't know," she said. "The baby kicked."

He leaned back, muscles unknotted.

"That's to be expected," he said.

They sat quietly a while. Ann toyed with her food. Once he saw her reach out automatically for the salt, then raise her eyes in slight alarm when her fingers didn't find the shaker.

"David," she said, after a few minutes.

He swallowed his food. "What?"

"Why have you stayed with me?"

He couldn't answer.

"Is it because you believe me?"

"I don't know, Ann. I don't know."

The look of slight hope on her face left and she lowered her head.

"I thought," she said, "Maybe . . . because you were staying . . ."

The crying again. She sat there

not even bothering to brush aside the tears that moved slowly down her cheeks and over her lips.

"Oh, *Ann*," he said, half irritably, half in sorrow.

He got up to go to her. As he did her body twitched again, this time more violently, and her face went blank. Again she cut off her sobs and rubbed at her cheeks with almost angry fingers.

"I can't *help* it," she said slowly and loudly.

Not to him. Collier was sure it was not to him.

"What are you talking about?" he said nervously.

He stood there looking down at his wife. She looked so helpless, so afraid. He wanted to pull her against himself and comfort her. He wanted to . . .

Still sitting, she leaned against his chest while he stroked her soft brown hair.

"Poor little girl," he said. "My poor little girl."

"Oh David, *David*, if only you'd believe me. I'd do anything to make you believe me, anything. I can't stand to have you so cold to me. Not when I know I haven't done anything wrong."

He stood there silently and his mind spoke to him. There is a chance, it said, a chance.

She seemed to guess what he was thinking. Because she looked up at him and there was absolute trust in her eyes.

"Anything, David, *anything*."

"Can you hear me, Ann?" he said.

"Yes," she said.

They were in Professor Mead's office. Ann lay on the couch, her eyes closed. Mead took the needle from Collier's fingers and put it on the desk. He sat on the corner of the desk and watched in grim silence.

"Who am I, Ann?"

"David."

"How do you feel, Ann?"

"Heavy. I feel heavy."

"Why?"

"The baby is so heavy."

Collier licked his lips. Why was he putting it off, asking these extraneous questions? He knew he wanted to ask. Was he too afraid? What if, despite her insistence on this, she gave the wrong answer?

He gripped his hands together tightly and his throat seemed to become a column of rock.

"Dave, not too long," Johnny cautioned.

Collier drew in a rasping breath.

"Is it . . ." he started, then swallowed with difficulty, "Is it . . . *my* child, Ann?"

She hesitated. She frowned. Her eyes flickered open for a second, then shut. Her entire body writhed. She seemed to be fighting the question. Then the color drained from her face.

"*No*," she said through clenched teeth.

Collier felt himself stiffening as if all his muscles and tendons were dough expanding and pushing out his flesh.

"Who's the father?" he asked, not realizing how loud and unnatural his voice was.

At that, Ann's body shuddered violently. There was a clicking sound in her throat and her head rolled limply on the pillow. At her sides, the white fists opened slowly.

Mead jumped over and put his fingers to her wrist. His face was taut as he felt for the pulsebeat. Satisfied, he lifted her right eyelid and peered at the eye.

"She's really out," he said, "I told you it wasn't a good idea to give serum to such a heavily pregnant woman. You should have done it months ago. Kleinman won't like this."

Collier sat there not hearing a word, his face a mask of hopeless distress.

"Is she all right?" he asked.

But the words hardly came out. He felt something shake in his chest. He didn't realize what it was until it was too late. Then he ran shaking hands over his cheeks and stared at the wet fingers with incredulous eyes. His mouth opened, closed. He tried to cut off the sobs but he couldn't.

He felt Johnny's arm around his shoulders.

"It's all right, boy," Johnny said.

Collier jammed his eyes shut, wishing that his whole body could be swallowed up in the swimming darkness before his gaze. His chest heaved with trembling breaths and he couldn't swallow the lump in his throat. His head kept shaking slowly. My life is ended, he thought, I loved and trusted her and she has betrayed me.

"Dave?" he heard Johnny say.

Collier grunted.

"I don't want to make things worse. But . . . well, there's still a hope, I think."

"Huh?"

"Ann didn't answer your question. She didn't say the father was . . . another man," he finished weakly.

Collier pushed angrily to his feet.

"Oh *shut up*, will you?" he said.

Later they carried her to the car and Collier drove her home.

Slowly he took off his coat and hat and let them drop on the hall chest. Then he shuffled into the living room and sank down on his chair. He lifted his feet to the ottoman with a weary grunt. He sat there, slumped over, staring at the wall.

Where was she? — he wondered. Upstairs reading probably, just as he'd left her this morning. She had a pile of library books by the bed. Rousseau, Locke, Hegel, Marx, Descartes, Darwin, Berg-

son, Freud, Whitehead, Jeans, Eddington, Einstein, Emerson, Dewey, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, Schopenhauer, James — an endless assortment of books.

And the way she read them. As if she were sitting there and rapidly turning the pages without even looking at what was written on them. Yet he knew she was getting it all. Once in a while she'd let a phrase drop, a concept, an idea. She was getting every word.

But why?

Once he had gotten the wild idea that Ann had read something about acquired characteristics and was trying to pass along this knowledge to her unborn child. But he had quickly put aside that idea. Ann was intelligent enough to know that such a thing was patently impossible.

He sat there shaking his head slowly, a habit he'd acquired in the past few months. Why was he still with her? He kept asking himself the question. Somehow the months had slipped by and still he was living in this house. A hundred times he'd started to leave and changed his mind. Finally he'd given up and moved into the back bedroom. They lived now like landlord and tenant.

His nerves were starting to go. He found himself obsessed with an overwhelming impatience. If he was walking from one place to another he would suddenly feel a great rush of anger that he had not already completed the trip. He resented all transport, he wanted things done immediately. He snapped at his pupils whether they rated it or not. His classes were being so poorly conducted that he'd been called before Doctor Peden, the head of the Geology Department. Peden hadn't been too hard on him because he knew about Ann but Collier knew he couldn't go on like this.

His eyes moved over the room. The rug was thick with dust. He'd tried going over it with the vacuum whenever he thought of it, but it piled up too fast to keep pace with. The whole house was going to pot. He had to take care of his laundry. The machine in the basement hadn't been used for months. He didn't know how to operate it and Ann never touched it now. He took the clothes to the laundromat downtown.

When he'd commented once on the slovenliness of the house, Ann had looked hurt and started to cry. She cried all the time now and always the same way. First, as if she were going to continue for an hour straight. Then, suddenly, with lurching abruptness, she would stop crying and wipe away the tears. He got the impression sometimes that it had something to do with the child,

that she stopped for fear the crying would affect the baby. Or else it was the other way around, he thought, that the baby didn't like . . .

He closed his eyes as if to shut out the thought. His right hand tapped nervously and impatiently on the arm of the chair. He got up restlessly and walked around the room running a forefinger over flat surfaces, wiping the dust off on his handkerchief.

He stood staring malignantly at the heap of dishes in the sink, the unkempt condition of the curtains, the smeared linoleum. He felt like rushing upstairs and letting her know that, pregnancy or no pregnancy, she was going to snap out of this doldrum and act like a wife again or he was leaving.

He started through the dining room, then halfway to the stairs he hesitated, halted completely. He went back to the stove slowly and put the flame on underneath the coffee pot. The coffee would be stale but he'd rather drink it that way than make more.

What was the use? She'd try to talk to him and tell him she understood but then, as if she were under a spell, she'd start to cry. And, after a few moments, she'd get that startled look and stop crying. As a matter of fact she was even beginning to control her tears from the outset. As if she knew that the crying wasn't going to work so she may as well not start at all.

It was eerie.

The word brought him up short. That was it — *eerie*. The pneumonia. The decrease in fetal size. The reading. The desire for salt. The crying and the stopping of it.

He found himself staring at the white wall over the stove. He found himself shuddering.

Ann didn't tell us the father was another man.

When he came in she was in the kitchen drinking coffee. Without a word he took the cup from her and poured the remainder of it into the sink.

"You're not supposed to drink coffee," he said.

He looked into the coffee pot. He'd left it almost full that morning.

"Did you drink *all* of it?" he asked angrily.

She lowered her head.

"For God's sake, don't cry!" he rasped.

"I . . . I won't," she said.

"Why do you drink coffee when you know you're not supposed to?"

"I just couldn't stand it anymore."

"*Oh-h*," he said, clenching his teeth. He started out of the room.

"David, I can't help it," she called after him, "I can't drink water. I have to drink *something*.

David, can't — can't you! . . ."

He went upstairs and took a shower. He couldn't concentrate on anything. He put down the soap and then forgot where. He stopped shaving before he was done and wiped off the lather. Then, later, while he was combing his hair, he noticed half his face still bearded and, with a muffled curse, he lathered again and finished.

The night was like all the others except for one thing. When he went into the bedroom for clean pajamas he saw that she was having difficulty focusing her eyes. And, while he lay in the back bedroom correcting test papers, he heard her giggling. Later he tossed around for several hours before he slept and all that time she kept giggling at something. He wanted to slam the door shut and drown out the sound but he couldn't. He had to leave the door open in case she needed him during the night.

At last he slept. For how long he didn't know. It seemed only a moment before he lay there blinking up at the dark ceiling.

"*Now am I alien and forgotten, O lost of traveled night.*"

First he thought he was dreaming.

"*Murk and strangeness, here am I in ever night, hot, hot.*"

He sat up suddenly then, his heart jolting.

It was Ann's voice.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and found his slippers. He pushed up quickly and padded to the door, shivering as the cold air chilled the rayon thinness of his pajamas. He moved into the hall and heard her speaking again.

"*Dream of goodbyes, forsaken, plunged in swelling liquors, cry I for light, release me from torment and trial.*"

All spoken in a singsong rhythm, in a voice that was Ann's and not Ann's, more high-pitched, more tense.

She was lying there on her back, her hands pressed to her stomach. It was moving. He watched the flesh ripple under the thinness of her nightgown. She should have been chilled without any blankets but she seemed warm. The bedside lamp was still on, the book — *Science and Sanity, Korzybski* — fallen from her fingers and lying half open on the mattress.

It was her face. Sweat drops dotted it like hundreds of tiny crystals. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth.

Her eyes wide open.

"*Kin of the night, sickened of this pit, O send me not to make the way!*"

He felt a horrible fascination in standing there listening to her. But she was in pain. It was obvious from her whitened skin, the way her hands, like claws, raked the sheet at her sides into mounds

of wadded, sweat-streaked cotton.

"*I cry, I cry,*" she said. "*Rhyuio Gklemmo Fglwo!*"

He slapped her face and her body lurched on the bed.

"*He again, the hurting one!*"

Her lips spread wide in a scream. He slapped her again and focus came to her eyes. She lay there staring up at him in complete horror. Her hands jumped to her cheeks, pressing against them. She seemed to recoil into the bed. Her pupils shrank to pinpoints in the milkwhite of her eyes.

"No," she said, "*No!*"

"Ann, it's me, David! You're all right!"

She looked uncomprehendingly at him for a long moment, her breasts heaving with tortured breaths.

Then, suddenly, she was relaxed and recognized him. Her lower jaw went slack and a moan of relief filled her throat.

He sat down beside her and took her in his arms. She clung to him, crying, her face into his chest.

"All right, baby, let it out, let it out."

Again. The choking off of sobs, the suddenly dried eyes, the pulling away from him, the blank look.

"What is it?" he asked.

No answer. She stared at him.

"Baby, what *is* it? Why can't you cry?"

Something crossed her face, then slipped away.

"Baby, you should cry."

"I don't want to cry."

"Why not?"

"He won't let me," she blurted out.

Suddenly, they were both silent, staring at each other and, he knew, in an instant, that they were very close to the answer.

"*He?*" he asked.

"No," she said suddenly, "I don't mean it. I don't mean that. I don't mean *he*, I mean something else."

For a long time they sat there looking at each other. Then, speaking no more, he made her lie down and covered her up. He got a blanket and stayed the rest of the night in the chair by the bureau. When he woke up in the morning, cramped and cold, he saw that she'd thrown off the blankets again.

Kleinman told him that Ann had adjusted to cold. There seemed to be something added to her system which was sending out heat to her when she needed it.

"And all this salt she takes." Kleinman threw up his hands. "It is beyond sense. You would think the child thrives on a saline diet. Yet she no longer gains excess weight. She does not drink water to combat the thirst. What does she do to ease the thirst?"

"Nothing," Collier said. "She's always thirsty."

"And the reading, it goes on?"

"Yes," said Collier.

"And the talking in her sleep?"

"Yes."

Kleinman shook his head.

"Never in my life," he said, "have I seen a pregnancy like this."

She finished up the last of the huge pile she'd been constantly augmenting. She took all the books back to the library.

A new development began.

She was seven months pregnant. It was May and Collier noticed that the oil was filthy, the tires were unnaturally worn and there was a dent in the left rear fender.

"Have you been using the car?" he asked her one Saturday morning. It was in the living room, the phonograph was playing Brahms.

"Why?" she asked.

He told her and she said irritably,

"If you already know, why do you ask me?"

"Have you?"

"Yes, I've been using the car. Is that permissible?"

"You needn't be sarcastic."

"Oh no," she said angrily, "I needn't get sarcastic. I've been pregnant seven months and not once have you believed that some other man isn't the father. No matter how many times I've told you that I'm innocent, you still won't say — I believe you. And *I'm* sarcastic. Oh, honest, David, you're a panic, a real panic."

She stamped over to the phonograph and turned it off.

"I'm *listening* to it," he said.

"That's too bad. I don't like it."

"Since when?"

"Oh, leave me alone."

He caught her by the wrist as she turned away.

"Listen," he said, "maybe you think the whole thing has been a vacation for me. I come home from six months research and find you pregnant. Not by me! I don't care what you say, I'm *not* the father and I nor anyone else knows any way but one for a woman to get pregnant. Still I haven't left. I've watched you turn into a book-reading machine. I've had to clean the house when I could, cook most of the meals, take care of our clothes — as well as teach every day at the college. I've had to look over you as I would a child, keeping you from kicking off the blankets, keeping you from eating too much salt, from drinking too much water, too much coffee, from smoking too much . . ."

"I've stopped smoking myself," she said, pulling away.

"Why?" he threw at her suddenly.

She looked blank.

"Go ahead," he said, "say it. Because *he* doesn't like it."

"I stopped smoking myself,"

she repeated. "I can't stand them."

"And now you don't like music."

"It . . . hurts my stomach," she said, vaguely.

"Nonsense," he said.

Before he could stop her, she'd gone out the front door into the blazing sunlight. He went to the door and watched her get into the car clumsily. He started to call to her but she'd started the motor and couldn't hear him. He watched the car disappear up the block doing fifty in second gear.

"How long has she been gone now?" Johnny asked.

Collier glanced nervously at his watch.

"I don't know exactly," he said. "Since around nine-thirty, I guess. We'd argued, as I said . . ."

He broke off nervously and checked his watch again. It was past midnight.

"How long has she been driving like this?" Johnny asked.

"I don't know, Johnny. I told you I just found out."

"Doesn't her size . . . ?" started Johnny.

"No, the baby isn't big anymore." Collier spoke the astounding now in a matter-of-fact voice. He ran a shaky hand through his hair.

"You think we should call the police?" he asked.

"Wait a little."

"What if she's had an accident?" Collier said. "She's not the best driver in the world. Why in God's name did I let her go? Seven months pregnant and I let her go driving. Oh, I ought to be . . ."

He felt himself getting ready to crack. All this tension in his house, this strange and endlessly distressing pregnancy — it was getting to him. A man couldn't hold onto tension for seven months and not feel it. He couldn't keep his hands from shaking anymore. He'd developed a habit of persistent blinking to use up some of the nervous energy.

He paced across the rug to the fireplace and stood there tapping his nails nervously on the shelf.

"I think we should call the police," he said.

"Take it easy," Johnny warned.

"What would you advise?" Collier snapped.

"Sit down. Right there. That's it. Now, relax. She's all right, believe me. I'm not worried about Ann. She's probably had a flat or an engine failure somewhere in the middle of nowhere. How many times have I heard you go on about needing a new battery? It probably died, that's all."

"Well . . . wouldn't the police be able to find her a lot quicker?"

"All right, boy, if it'll make you happier, I'll call them."

Collier nodded, then started up as a car passed in the street.

He rushed to the window and drew back the blinds. Then he bit his lips and turned back. He went back to the fireplace while Johnny moved for the hall phone. He listened to Johnny dialing, then twitched as the receiver was put down hurriedly.

"Here she is," Johnny said.

They led her into the front room, dizzy and confused. She didn't answer Collier's frantic questions. She headed straight for the kitchen as if she didn't notice them.

"Coffee," she said in a guttural voice.

At first Collier tried to stop her, then he felt Johnny's hand on his arm.

"Let her go," Johnny said. "It's time we got to the bottom of this."

She stood in front of the stove and turned the flame up high under the coffee pot. She ladled in careless spoonfuls, then slammed on the lid, and stood looking down at it studiedly.

Collier started to say something but, once more, Johnny restrained him. Collier stood restively in the kitchen doorway, watching his wife.

When the brown liquid started popping up into the dome, Ann grabbed the pot off the stove without using a potholder. Collier drew in his breath and gritted his teeth.

She poured out the steaming liquid and its sloshed up the sides of the used cup on the table. Then she slammed down the pot and reached hungrily for the cup.

She finished the whole pot in ten minutes.

She drank without cream or sugar, as if she didn't care what it tasted like. As if she didn't taste it at all.

Only when she'd finished did her face relax. She slumped back in the chair and sat there a long time. They watched her in silence.

Then she looked up at them and giggled.

She pushed up and fell against the table. Collier heard Johnny draw in sudden breath.

"My God," he said, "she's *drunk!*"

She was a heavy, unwieldy form to get up the stairs, especially since she gave them no assistance. She kept humming to herself — a strange, discordant melody that seemed to move in indefinable tone steps, repeated and repeated like the sound of low wind. There was a beatific smile on her face.

"A lot of good that did," Collier muttered.

"Be patient, be patient," Johnny whispered back.

"Easy enough for you to . . ."

"Shhh," Johnny quieted him but Ann didn't hear a word they said.

She stopped humming as soon as they put her down on the bed and had fallen into a deep sleep

before they straightened up. Collier drew a thin blanket over her and put a pillow under her head. She didn't stir as he lifted her head.

Then the two men stood in silence beside the bed. Collier looked down at the wife he no longer understood. His mind swam with painful discordances and, through them all, burned the horrible strain of doubt that had never left him. Who was the father of her child? Even though he couldn't leave her, even though he felt a great loving pity for her — they could never be close again until he knew.

"I wonder where she goes?" Johnny asked. "When she drives, I mean."

"I don't know." Sullenly.

"She must have gone pretty far to wear down the tires so much. I wonder if . . ."

That was when she started again.

"*Send me not,*" she said.

Johnny gripped Collier's arm.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"I don't know yet."

"*Black, black, drive me out, horror in these shores, heavy, heavy.*"

Collier shuddered.

"That's it," he said.

Johnny knelt hurriedly beside the bed and listened carefully.

"*Breathe me, implore my fathers, seek me out in washing pain, send me not to make the way.*"

Johnny stared at Ann's taut features. She looked as if she were in pain again. And yet it was not her face, Collier suddenly realized. The expression wasn't hers.

Ann threw off the blanket and thrashed on the bed, sweat breaking out on her face.

"*To walk on shores of orange sea, cool, to tread the crimson fields, cool, the raft on silent waters, cool, to ride upon the desertland, cool, return me fathers of my fathers, Rhyuio Gklemmo Fglwo.*"

Then she was silent except for tiny groans. At her sides, her hands clutched the sheets and her breaths were labored and uneven.

Johnny straightened up and looked at Collier. Neither of them spoke a word.

They sat with Kleinman.

"What you suggest is fantastic," the doctor said.

"Listen," Johnny said. "let's run it down. One — the excess saline requirements, not the requirements of a normal pregnancy. Two — the cold, the way Ann's body adjusted to it, the way she was cured of pneumonia in minutes."

Collier sat staring numbly at his friend.

"All right," Johnny said, "first the salt. In the beginning it made Ann drink too much water. She gained weight and then her weight endangered the child. What happened? She no longer was allowed to drink water."

"Allowed?" Collier asked.

"Let me finish," Johnny said. "About the cold; it was as if the child needed cold and forced Ann to stay cold — until it realized that by acquiring itself some comfort it was endangering the very vessel it lived in. So it cured the vessel of pneumonia. It adjusted the vessel to cold."

"You talk as if . . ." Kleinman started.

"The effects of cigarettes," Johnny said. "Excuse me, doctor. Ann could have smoked in moderation without endangering herself or the child. Yet she stopped altogether. It might have been an ethical point, true. Again, it might be that the child reacted violently to nicotine, and, in a sense, forbade her to . . ."

Kleinman interrupted irritably.

"You talk as if the child were directing its mother rather than being helpless, subject to its mother's actions."

"Helpless?" was all Johhny said.

Kleinman didn't go on. He pressed his lips together in annoyed surrender and tapped nervously on his desk. Johnny waited a moment and then, seeing that Kleinman wasn't going to continue, he went on.

"Three — the aversion to music which she once loved. Why? Because it was music? I don't think so. *Because of the vibrations*. Vibrations which a normal child wouldn't even notice being so insulated from sound not only by the layers of its mother's epidermis but by the very structure of its own hearing apparatus. Apparently, this . . . child . . . has much keener hearing.

"The coffee," he said. "It made her drunk. Or — it made *it* drunk."

"Now wait," Collier started, then broke off.

"And now," Johnny said, "as to her reading. It fits in too. All those books — more or less the basic works in every field of knowledge, a seemingly calculated study of mankind and his every thought."

"What are you driving at?" Collier spoke nervously.

"Think, Dave! All these things. The reading, the trips in the car. As if she were trying to get as much information as she could about life in our civilization. As if the child were . . ."

"You are not implying that the child was . . ." Kleinman began.

"Child?" Johnny said grimly. "I think we can stop referring to it as a child. Perhaps the body is childlike. But the mind — *never*."

They were deadly silent. Collier felt his heart pulsing strangely in his chest.

"Listen," Johnny said. "Last night Ann — or the . . . *it* — was drunk. Why? Maybe because of what it's learned, what it's seen. I hope so. Maybe it was sick and wanted to forget."

He leaned forward.

"Those visions Ann had; I think they tell the story — as crazy as it is. The deserts, the marshes, the crimson fields. Add the cold. Only one thing wasn't mentioned and I think that's probably because they don't exist."

"What?" Collier asked, reality scaling away from him.

"The canals," Johnny said. "*Ann has a Martian in her womb.*"

For a long time they looked at him in incredulous silence. Then both started talking at once, protesting with nervous horror in their voices. Johnny waited until the first spasm of their words had passed.

"Is there a better answer?" he asked.

"But . . . *how?*" Kleinman asked heatedly. "How could such a pregnancy be effected?"

"I don't know," Johnny said. "But why? I think I know."

Collier was afraid to ask.

"All through the years," Johnny said, "there's been no end of talk and writing about the Martians, about flying saucers. Books, stories, movies, articles — always with the same theme."

"I don't . . ." Collier began.

"I think the invasion has finally come," Johnny said. "At least a tryout. I think this is their first attempt, an insidious, cruel attempt — invasion by flesh. To place an adult life cell from their own planet into the body of an Earth woman. Then, when this fully matured Martian mind is coupled to the form of an Earth child — the process of conquest begins. This is their experiment, I think, their test. If it works . . ."

He didn't finish.

"But . . . oh, that's *insane*," Collier said, trying to push away the fear that was crowding him in.

"So is her reading," said Johnny. "So are her trips in the car. So is her coffee drinking and her dislike of music and her pneumonia healing and her standing out in the cold and the reduction of body size and the visions and that crazy toneless song she sang. What do you want, Dave — a blueprint?"

Kleinman stood up and went to his filing cabinets. He pulled out a drawer and came back to the desk with a folder in his hand.

"I have had this in my files for three weeks now," he said. "I have not told you. I did not know how. But this information, this *theory*," he quickly amended, "compels me to . . ."

He pushed the x-ray slide across the desk to them.

They looked at it and Collier gasped. Johnny's voice was awed.

"*A double heart*," he said.

Then his left hand bunched into a fist.

"That clinches it!" he said. "Mars has two fifths the gravity

of Earth. They'd need a double heart to drive their blood or whatever it is they have in their veins."

"But . . . it does not need this here," Kleinman said.

"Then there's some hope," Johnny said. "There are rough spots in this invasion. The Martian cell would, of genetic necessity, cause certain Martian characteristics in the child — the double heart, the acute hearing, the need for salt, I don't know why, the need for cold. In time — and if this experiment works — they may iron out these difficulties and be able to create a child with only the Martian mind and every physical characteristic Earthlike. I don't know but I suspect the Martian is also telepathic. Otherwise how would it have known it was in danger when Ann had pneumonia?"

The scene flitted suddenly across Collier's mind — him standing beside the bed, the thought — *the hospital, oh God, the hospital.* And, under Ann's flesh, a tiny alien brain, well versed by then in the terms of Earth, plucking at his thought. Hospital, investigation, discovery . . . He shuddered convulsively.

". . . we to do?" he caught the tail end of Kleinman's question. "Kill the . . . the *Martian* after it is born?"

"I don't know," Johnny said. "But if this . . . ," he shrugged, "this *child* is born alive and born normal — I don't think killing would help. I'm sure they must be watching. If the birth is normal — they might assume their experiment is a success whether we killed the child or not."

"A Caeserian?" Kleinman said.

"Maybe," Johnny said. "But . . . would they be sure they've failed if we had to use artificial means to destroy . . . their first invader? No, I don't think it's good enough. They'd try again, this time somewhere where no one could check on it — in an African village, in some unavailable town, in . . ."

"We can't leave that . . . that *thing* in her!" Collier said in horror.

"How do we know we can remove it?" Johnny said grimly, "and not kill Ann?"

"What?" Collier asked, feeling as if he were some brainless straight man for horror.

Johnny exhaled raggedly.

"I think we have to wait," he said. "I don't think we have any choice."

Then, seeing the look on Collier's face he hurriedly added,

"It's not hopeless, boy. There are things in our favor. The double heart which might drive the blood too fast. The difficulties of combining alien cells. The fact that it's July and the heat might destroy the Martian. The fact that we can cut off all its salt

supply. It can all help. But, most of all, because the Martian isn't happy. It drank to forget and — what were its words? *O, send me not to make the way.*"

He looked grimly at them.

"Let's hope it dies of despair," he said.

"Or?" Collier asked hollowly.

"Or else this . . . miscegnation from space succeeds."

Collier dashed up the stairs, his heart pounding with a strange ambivalent beat. Knowing at last that she was innocent was horribly balanced by knowledge of the danger she was in.

At the top of the stairs he stopped. The house was silent and hot in the late afternoon.

They were right, he suddenly realized, right in advising him not to tell her. It hadn't actually struck him until then, he'd thought it wrong not to let her know. He'd thought she wouldn't mind as long as she knew what it was, as long as she had his faith again.

But now he wondered. It was a terrifying thing, the import of it made him tremble. Might not the knowledge of this horror drive her into hysterics; she'd been bordering on breakdown for the past three months.

His mouth tightened and he walked into the room.

She lay on her back, her hands resting limply on her swollen stomach, her lifeless eyes staring up at the ceiling. He sat down on the edge of the bed. She didn't look at him.

"Ann."

No answer. He felt himself shiver. I can't blame you, he thought, I've been harsh and thoughtless.

"Sweetheart," he said.

Her eyes moved slowly over and their gaze on him was cold and alien. It was the creature in her, he thought, she didn't realize how it controlled her. She must never realize. He knew that then, clearly.

He leaned over and pressed his cheek against hers.

"Darling," he said.

A dull, tired voice, hardly audible. "What?"

"Can you hear me?" he said.

She didn't reply.

"Ann, about the baby."

There was a slight sign of life in her eyes.

"What about the baby?"

He swallowed.

"I . . . I know that . . . that it isn't the baby of . . . another man."

For a moment she stared at him. Then she muttered, "Bravo," and turned her head away.

He sat there, hands gripped into tight fists, thinking — well, that's that, I've killed her love completely.

But then her head turned back. There was something in her eyes, a tremulous questioning.

"What?" she said.

"I believe you," he said. "I know you've told me the truth. I'm apologizing with all my heart . . . if you'll let me."

For a long moment nothing seemed to register. Then she took her hands from her stomach and pressed them against her cheeks. Her wide brown eyes began to glisten as they looked at him.

"You're not . . . fooling me?" she asked him.

For a moment he hung suspended, then he threw himself against her.

"Oh, Ann, Ann," he said, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Ann."

Her arms slid around his neck and held him. He felt her breasts shake with inner sobs. Her right hand caressed his hair.

"David, David . . ." She said it like that, over and over.

For a long time they remained there, silent and at peace. Then she asked,

"What made you change your mind?"

His throat moved.

"I just did," he said.

"But why?"

"No reason, honey. I mean, of course, there was a reason. I just realized that . . ."

"You've doubted me for seven months, David. Why did you change your mind now?"

He felt a burst of rage at himself. Was there nothing he could tell her that would satisfy her?

"I think I've misjudged you," he said.

"Why?"

He sat up and looked at her without the answer. The look of soft happiness was leaving her face. Her expression was taut and unyielding.

"*Why*, David?"

"I told you, sweet. . . ."

"You didn't tell me."

"Yes, I did. I said I think I've misjudged you."

"That's no reason."

"Ann, don't let's argue now. Does it matter if . . ."

"Yes, it matters a lot!" she said, her voice breaking, as her breath caught.

"And what about your biological assurances?" she said. "No woman can have a baby without being impregnated by a man. You always made that very clear. What about that? Have you given up your faith in biology and transferred it to me?"

"No, darling," he said. "I simply know things I didn't know before."

"What things?"

"I can't tell you."

"More secrets! Is this Kleinman's advice, just a trick to make my last month cozy? Don't lie to me, I know when you're lying to me."

"Ann, don't get so excited."

"I'm not excited!"

"You're shouting. Now stop it."

"I will not stop it! You toy with my feelings for more than half a year and now you want me to be calmly rational! Well, I won't be! I'm sick of you and your pompous attitude! I'm tired of . . . *Uhhh!*"

She lurched on the bed, her head snapping as she jerked her head from the pillow, all the color drained from her face in an instant. Her eyes on him were the eyes of a wounded child, dazed and shocked.

"*My insides!*" she gasped.

"Ann!"

She was half sitting now, her body shaking, a wild, despairing groan starting up in her throat. He grabbed her shoulders and tried to steady her. The Martian! — the thought clutched at his mind — it doesn't like her angry!

"It's all right baby, all r . . ."

"He's hurting me!" she cried. "He's hurting me, David! *Oh God!*"

"He can't hurt you," he heard himself say.

"No, no, no, I can't stand it," she said between clenched teeth. "*I can't stand it.*"

Then, as abruptly as the attack had come, her face relaxed utterly. Not so much with actual relaxation as with a complete absence of all feeling. She looked dizzily at David.

"I'm numb," she said quietly, "I . . . can't . . . feel . . . a . . ."

Slowly she sank back on the pillow and lay there a second with her eyes open. Then she smiled drowsily at Collier.

"Good night, David," she said.

And closed her eyes.

Kleinman stood beside the bed.

"She is in perfect coma," he said, quietly. "More accurately I should say under hypnotic trance. Her body functions normally but her brain has been . . . frozen."

Johnny looked at him.

"Suspended animation?"

"No, her body functions. She is just asleep. I cannot wake her."

They went downstairs to the living room.

"In a sense," Kleinman said, "she is better off. There will be no upsets now. Her body will function painlessly, effortlessly."

"The Martian must have done it," Johnny said, "to safeguard its . . . home."

Collier shuddered.

"I'm sorry, Dave," Johnny said.

They sat silent a moment.

"It must realize we know about it," Johnny said.

"Why?" asked Collier.

"It wouldn't be tipping off its hand completely if it thought there was still a chance of secrecy."

"Maybe it could not stand the pain," said Kleinman.

Johnny nodded, "Yes, maybe."

Collier sat there, his heart beating strainedly. Suddenly he

clenched his fists and drove them down on his legs.

"Meanwhile, what are we supposed to do!" he said. "Are we helpless before this . . . this *trespasser?*"

"We can't take risks with Ann," was all Johnny said and Kleinman nodded once.

Collier sank back in the chair. He sat staring at the kewpie doll on the mantel. *Coney Island* read the doll's dress and on the belt — *Happy Days.*

"*Rhyuio Gklemmo Fglwo!*"

Ann writhed in unconscious labor on the hospital bed. Collier stood rigidly beside her, his eyes fastened to her sweat-streaked face. He wanted to run for Kleinman but he knew he shouldn't. She'd been like this twenty hours now — twenty hours of twisting, teeth-clenching agony. When it had started he'd cut his classes completely to stay with her.

He reached down trembling fingers to hold her damp hand. Her fingers clamped on his until the grip almost hurt. And, as he watched in numbed horror, he saw the face of the Earth-formed Martian passing across his wife's features — the slitted eyes, the thin, drawn-back lips, the white skin pulled rigidly over facial bones.

"*Pain! Pain! Spare me, fathers of my fathers, send me not to . . .!*"

There was a clicking in her throat, then silence. Her face suddenly relaxed and she lay there shivering weakly. He began to pat her face with a towel.

"In the yard, David," she muttered, still unconscious.

He bent over suddenly, his heart jolting.

"In the yard, David," she said, "I heard a sound and I went out. The stars were bright and there was a crescent moon. While I stood there I saw a white light come over the yard. I started to run back to the house but something hit me. Like a needle going into my back and my stomach. I cried out but then it was black and I couldn't remember. Anything. I tried to tell you David, but I couldn't remember, I couldn't remember, I couldn't . . ."

A hospital. In the corridor the father paces, his eyes feverish and haunted. The hall is hot and silent in the early August morning. He walks back and forth restlessly and his hands are white fists at his sides.

A door opens. The father whirls as a doctor comes out. The doctor draws down the cloth which has covered his mouth and nose. He looks at the man.

"*Your wife is well,*" *says the doctor.*

The father grabs the doctor's arm.

"*And the baby?*" *he asks.*

"*The baby is dead.*"

"*Thank God,*" *the father says.*

Still wondering if in Africa, in Asia . . .

Illustrator: Henry Sharp

THE MONSTERS

By JEROME BIXBY

"Ya wanna know how to get along in this world, buster? Then I'll tell ya. Be tough! Ya gotta be tough and don't let nobody soft-talk ya into lettin' ya guard down. All they're tryin' to do is find an opening to lay ya flat with a haymaker. I'm tellin' ya! Everybody's got a angle, see? Ya take a guy what offers ya a piece o' cake and ya say thanks kindly and bite into it and wham! Rocks in the cake! Busted molars! Big laugh on ya! A guy comes along and says here's a juicy deal for ya, kid. So ya sign up. Then the guy says, Oh, I forgot to tell ya — juicy for me, not you. Then he walks away leavin' ya widout ya pants! I tell ya, buster, everybody's out promotin' for a quick buck and if ya give 'em an inch they'll take everything but the sweatband out o' ya hat. Hey, kid! Wait up!

"Cripes! Why ain't I more popular wit' my friends?"

THEY were sitting around in Packy's Bar-and-Grill on Third Avenue, waiting for the historic television broadcast to begin. The 26" color-vision at the end of the bar had been blaring out spot announcements about it for the past couple of hours. A big man in shirt-sleeves came in and took a stool halfway up the bar, signalling for a beer, just as the next spot came up.

"Attention, please," the young man on the screen said. "In exactly eight minutes — at two

o'clock, Eastern Standard Time — we will bring you a special news broadcast from United Nations Headquarters in New York, where U. N. Secretary Jacob Stern will officially greet the leader of the aliens whose spaceship landed this morning on our planet! We repeat: at two o'clock, on all networks, you will see Secretary Stern officially greet the aliens who landed on Earth this morning! We urge you to stay tuned for this historic broadcast . . . See the first aliens ever to land on Earth! The Interplanetary Age has begun, ladies and gentlemen! Beings from another star —" here the announcer glanced down at a paper he held out of sight in his hand — "from the star," he went on carefully, "Beeta Centowri. They have traveled twelve years to reach our solar system — on a routine exploratory expedition, they say — and upon detecting signs of intelligent life on Earth, they proceeded directly here, landing at 7:32 this morning on a Kansas wheat field a few miles outside Wichita. Their skills enabled them to learn the English language almost in minutes, and U. N. authorities were swiftly persuaded that they meant no harm. I repeat, ladies and gentlemen: *the authorities are assured of the aliens' peaceful intentions!* There is *no* cause for alarm. The aliens are greatly advanced, and friendly. So stay tuned to this station to see the first alien ever to set foot on this planet! And now —"

A box of breakfast food walked onto the screen and began to sing.

"*I'm* not assured," the stocky man in the gray suit said sullenly. "How in hell can they tell in a few hours whether they're planning to attack us or not! I think we ought've thrown an aitch at them the minute they landed!" He stared up at the box of breakfast food, now dancing with a spoon and a pitcher of cream. "Wonder what the alien will say, anyway? Maybe it can't talk. Maybe it's a damn monster — can only grunt. *Gr-r-run-n-nk . . . oink, oink, oink!*" He laughed. He was a little drunk. His eyes were heavy-lidded and feathered with red. His girlfriend, sitting beside him, was the only one in the bar who laughed.

Packy, behind the bar, said, "Listen, Joe . . . anything that can build a rocketship and come across space from some other star can do a lot more than grunt. It's no dope, whatever it is!"

Joe said, "All right — I still don't like it. I don't like it, by Christ! I think maybe they come to take over Earth. To conquer us. Why else? They're just a bunch of damn monsters from some other star."

"Why else should they come?" The big man in shirtsleeves set down his beer, eyes amused. "You asked why else? Curiosity's why. What's the universe all about?

Same reason we've been trying to get out into space."

Joe turned on his stool to stare at the big man. "Who's been filling your ears with that crap? Only reason we ever tried to build a rocketship was to get the damn Russkies before they got us! That's the only reason, brother. I was in the army, and I know. And you can bet your life that these things from — whatever that star was — do things the same way. Costs a lotta scratch to build a rocketship. They build one and come all this way, you can bet there's a reason. Bet your life!"

"If you're right," the old man in the front booth said, "maybe our lives *will* be on the board."

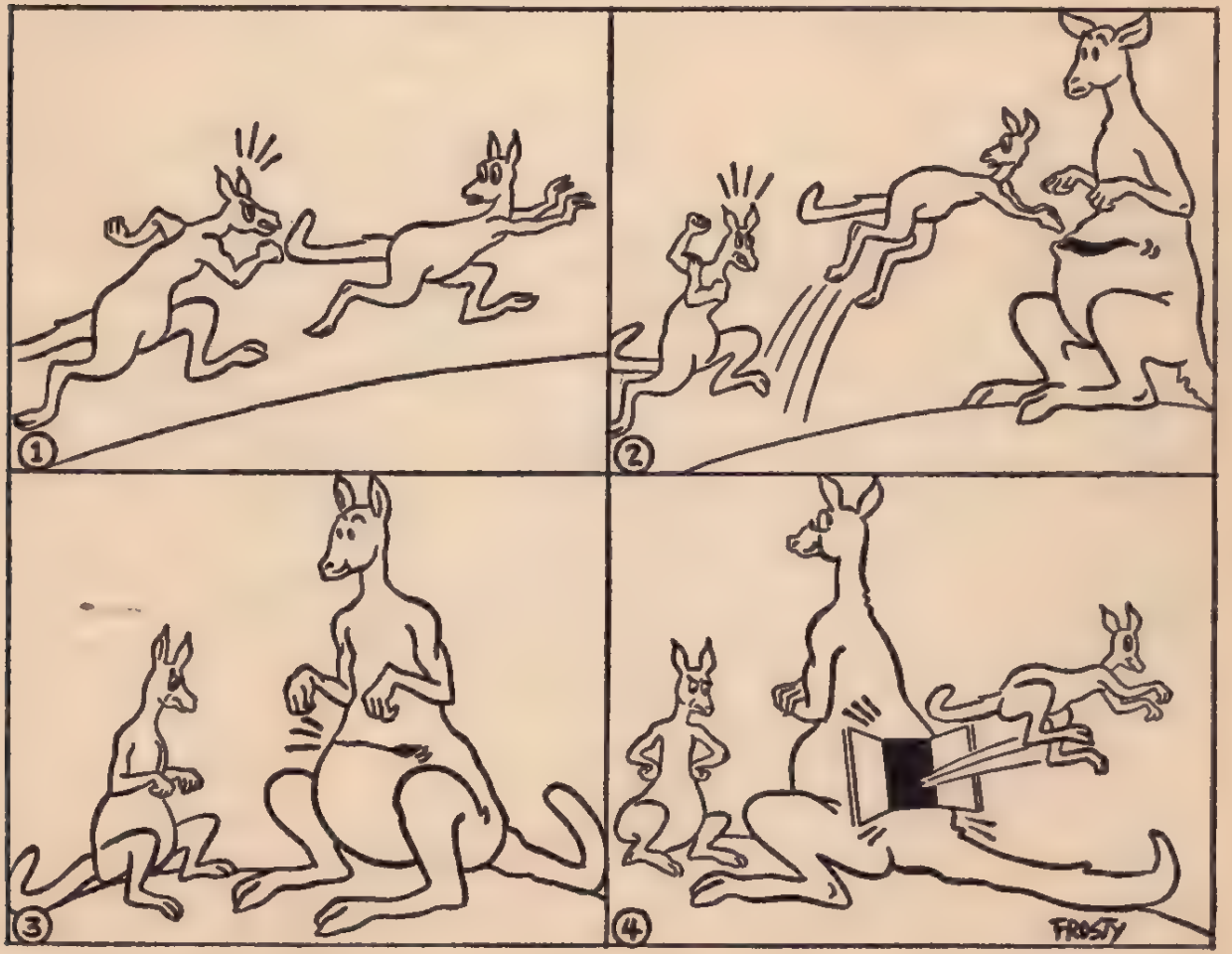
Joe turned to look at him. "Go ahead, kid about it," he said nastily. "Wait'll you see the goddam monsters staring at you out of that screen there."

The old man said calmly, "Who's kidding?"

"Just wait and see," Joe muttered. "Monsters. You'll see!"

The breakfast food had vanished from the screen. A man in a white suit was leading a small orchestra. A customer got up and walked toward the rear.

The big man said, "Ever since nineteen-fifty or so, we've been trying to get out into space. Almost fifteen years. Back then



maybe we *were* thinking mostly about military uses for rockets. But everything is pretty peaceful now. The U. N. is in pretty good shape." He signalled Packy for another beer. "And we're *still* trying to get out into space. Except now we're all pulling together. Why, do you suppose?"

Joe said nastily, "You know damn good and well that someday we'll have to lick the Russkies. Sure we're working together — swiping each other's ideas right and left. This is just a breather. One of these days we get the old knife in the —"

The big man said, "That's your opinion, chum. *I* think we've got a lot of nice, quiet peace ahead. I think we've finally got a little sense about running a world. Things are working out just fine —"

"All you one-worlders spout the same line," Joe grunted. "Lotta crap. You got a finger in a U. N. pie, maybe, putting up buildings or something?"

The big man turned slowly to face Joe and said, "You mind your manners, mister, or I'll shove your head right through that mirror." He glanced at Packy. "Hey, Packy — where's that beer?"

Packy drew one, slid it down to the big man and said to Joe, "Now take it easy. They don't *have* to come here to Earth to conquer us, do they? Like he says, maybe it's just curiosity. Take a look around the universe, see what cooks. Man, this is the first time we ever met another intelligent race. It's gonna mean big things! I don't even *know* what it'll mean! Don't it mean something to you? Has it always gotta be war, war, war, Joe?"

Joe snarled like a lap-dog. "Just wait, like *I* said. Wait'll you see some goddam monster staring out at you. Then see if you think it's going to cuddle up next to us! Goddam monster from another star!"

"You keep calling them monsters," the big man said, looking up. "How do you know they're monsters? I haven't heard any descriptions."

"That's just why," Joe said, looking at him sourly in the mirror. "Why haven't we been told what they look like? Why keep it a secret, tarzan, if there's nothing to hide?"

Packy laughed nervously. "They ain't keeping it a secret, Joe. Jesus, they only landed this morning. The U. N. clamped down on the whole thing while they were making sure everything was okay. Now they're satisfied the aliens are leveling. If they're satisfied, why shouldn't you be?"

The big man said, from right behind Joe, "You call me just one more name, Joe Shmoe, and I'll make a monster out of *you!* I'll turn you inside out and throw you away, piece by piece." He shoved

Joe's shoulder, so that Joe spilled part of his drink in his lap. "Catch?" He shoved again, almost gently. "Catch?"

Joe didn't look around. He just stared down at the bar, his face ugly. His girl-friend glared at the big man as he went back to his stool and sat down. The big man sipped at his beer. The orchestra on the screen kept playing, the man in the white suit making jiggling motions with his baton and left hand.

Joe said, in a grating voice, "They'll be monsters anyway! Wait and see. Goddam ugly, slimy monsters. Come here to take over Earth!" He belched and shoved his drink away from him. The glass slid on the wet wood to the inside rim of the bar, teetered, fell over behind and broke. Joe began to curse in a thick monotone.

Packy said, "Joe, cut it out, will you?"

He paused. Joe had almost fallen off his stool.

"Ah, he's drunk as a bat," the old man in the booth said. "He's plain stupid to begin with, and now he's loaded to boot."

The big man said, "So because they're aliens, they're monsters, huh, Joe?"

Joe didn't look at him.

"And because they're monsters, they're going to wipe us all out and take over Earth," the big man pursued.

Joe's girl-friend said, "Why don't you all leave him alone?" She helped steady Joe on the stool.

The big man grinned. "Who should leave who alone, miss?"

The colorvision screen went gray-white for a moment, then lit up with a scene showing big white steps crowded with people. The picture suddenly pulled off to one side, stretching into rainbow lines. Packy grunted and turned the horizontal control. It was a very old set.

The picture came clear. It was a close-up of Secretary Stern of the United Nations. Behind him could be seen the shapes of other men in formal dress, and behind them was what looked like half the U. N. Army drawn up around the front of the building: tanks; soldiers with rifles and machine-guns; and beyond them, a crowd, filling the streets. A band struck up the United Nations anthem, "One World Forever."

"See?" Joe muttered. "Why all them guns, if the aliens are —"

"To protect them from halfwits like you," Packy said testily. "Keep quiet."

Reception wasn't very good, and Stern didn't speak very loudly. He never had been much of an orator. The watchers in Packy's Bar-and-Grill could make out only parts of his speech. His voice was trembling with some emotion.

"— this historic day — when

the Almighty has in His wisdom seen fit to reveal to us the existance of another intel . . . in His universe . . . welcome — welcome to Earth, travelers of —"

Joe mistook the emotion in Stern's voice to be fear. "See," he began. "*He's* got sense enough to be scared —"

Packy said, "Will you *shut up!*"

The camera had turned on the alien.

There was silence in the bar-and-grill. Packy stared. The big man's eyes widened. The old man adjusted his glasses and peered. Joe's girl-friend gawped. Joe began to turn white.

The alien's face — two eyes, friendly-looking; a nose, straight-bridged with patrician nostrils; a mouth, firm and smiling; a strong column of neck; bronze skin overall — stared back at them. Below the face were broad shoulders that filled a gold-colored metallic cloak. The alien's arms were folded beneath the cloak. He stood motionless, a head taller than those around him.

"Human," the big man in shirtsleeves breathed.

"I am happy," the alien began, in a deep, pleasant voice, "to represent my people on this wonderful occasion —"

"Perfect," Packy gasped. "He speaks perfect!"

"— extend our heartfelt wishes for mutual understanding."

To one side of the alien, on the steps, could be seen a group of men rapidly speaking into microphones; translators, giving spot breakdowns in a dozen languages to waiting millions.

"I want to assure the peoples of Earth —"

Secretary Stern was smiling. General Alan Russell, who had taken charge of contacting and communicating with the aliens and finally transporting them, was smiling at his side.

"— that we of Beta Centauri —"

Joe glared up at General Russell. "Fine army man," he spat. "Disgrace to your stars!"

"— have no intention whatever of trying to invade your Earth." Suddenly the alien managed to be both smiling and serious. "I thought I'd best be blunt about that. I could have put it more delicately, of course. Let me repeat: we have *no* intention of trying to harm you people of Earth or colonize your planet."

Cheering from the crowd started here and there; a moment later it thundered in the streets, drowning the alien out. The soldiers with the guns had them at dress salute. The cameras left the alien to move over the cheering crowd, then swung back to his handsome face. Finally he was able to continue.

"Your defense officials have already determined this to their own satisfaction. During our stay,

we will happily submit to interrogation and psychometric —"

"Should have blasted that goddam ship to hellangone," Joe snarled. "Fine army man you are!"

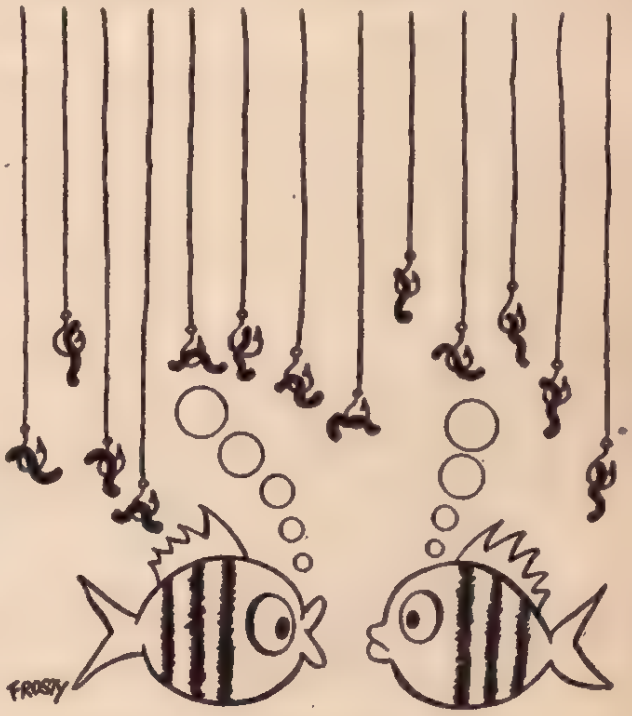
"We are a peaceful people. We have colonized three planets of our own solar system, and have absolutely no need or desire for further expansion. Believe what I say, people of Earth, and rejoice in our presence here as we rejoice in yours!" The alien was smiling broadly now. "We had no dream of such good fortune: to find a race so similar to our own! This is the beginning of a great age! Already we see many ways in which we may help you, and you us. We will work closely with your U.N. during our stay. When we leave, plans will have been made for mutual benefits that will endure down the centuries! And now . . . your United Nations Secretary, Mr. Stern, has more to say to you."

The alien saluted, hand to heart, and vanished as the cameras went back to Stern, who began paraphrasing the alien's promises of good faith. He was skillfully calm, reassuring.

But he did not manage to reassure Joe. Joe was suddenly on his feet.

SMOOTH-TALKING lying sons a bitches," he bawled. "They *are* here to kill us! They *are!* I don't care *what* they look like. I'm telling you! We ought've killed them! When I was in the army —"

The big man got up, his face flushed. He strode down the bar and put his face within inches of Joe's. "When you were in the army you should've got killed instead of some other boys I can think of. Why don't you go crawl in a garbage pail where your kind of mind belongs? Way back in the dark ages, where anything different is *bad*. That kind of talk has started a hundred wars, you dumb bastard. Anything you can't understand, you hate. You were all ready to fight monsters. You were sure they were different from us, so they were *bad!* That's damnfool enough. But now the aliens turn out to be just like us, and you *still* can't give up your precious little hare-brained idea, can you!



"It must be Friday again."

They're *still* bad, aren't they? — you Goddamned fool!"

Joe was retreating down the length of the bar, his face loose. The big man followed him.

"Maybe that's what took the U. N. so long to set in," the big man said savagely. "Too many people hang on to their precious ideas, even when they see them turning out wrong all over the place! They'll twist and squirm and fight like devils, just so nobody can prove *them* wrong. Well, listen, chump — those aliens are getting a chance to prove they're telling the truth — in *spite* of morons like you who judge somebody by shape or color or collar-size and let their crazy ideas get so important to them they'll blow up half of creation to prove they're right! Maybe the aliens *are* going to jump us. If they are, we'll know soon enough. And we won't be any worse off than we are right now when we believe what they say. I don't think we *are* bad off. I feel pretty damned good about the whole thing —"

Snarling, Joe turned and grabbed up a bottle and threw it at the big man with all his might. Joe's girl screamed. The big man ducked and hit Joe in the mouth. Joe slid to the floor.

The big man rubbed his knuckles. "I shouldn't've done that," he said. He let out a breath. "He's drunk. But he got me mad." He looked down at Joe. "Few years ago, down south, I could've been lynched for hitting a white man. This guy is the kind who always carried the rope."

"Don't worry about it," Packy said. He bent over Joe. "I think his jaw is broken," he said. "I'd better call an ambulance."

He went to the video booth. Joe's girl was crying. When Packy came back, Secretary Stern was concluding the ceremony. Smiling, he held out his hand right to the alien.

The camera moved back to show the alien up to his waist. The alien's gold-colored cloak stirred. His arms came out. He took the Secretary's right hand in one of his right hands. With his other right hand, he shook hands with General Russell. One of his left hands still held the microphone he had used. His other left hand was hooked by its thumb into the belt of the jaunty tunic he wore.

"Well," the big man said finally. "Well, I'll be damned." He spread his own two hands. "I don't think we're any worse off now than we were half a minute ago, do you? I feel about the same. Don't you? What the hell. He's the same guy."

Packy was blinking. "How alien can you get? I sure could use four of them in *my* racket. Sure, he's the same guy. Makes you think."

Joe's girl said, "I kind of liked his smile."

Joe groaned on the floor.

WILD TALENTS, INC.

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

One always feels sorry for the misfits of life — the poor bewildered lads and lasses with talents nobody has any use for. Now take that girl over there. She can start a fire at the drop of a hat — by merely staring intently at an inflammable object. But who wants fires started at the drop of a hat?

Take it from Robert Sheckley, the young man who wrote this story, things are going to get worse along that line long before they get better. Mankind is sharpening and improving every day. Weird talents are blooming faster than the need for them. So Bob extrapolated — a thing they do in science-fiction — and came up with Sidney Eskin. Gad! Fresh out of a nut-house, Sidney was a mess indeed. He had a talent, though. One that made fair ladies blush crimson, strong men turn white, and everyone head for the exits. Bob tells about it here.

GLANCING at his watch, Waverley saw that he still had ten minutes before the reporters were due. "Now then," he said in his best interviewing voice, "What can I do for you, sir?"

The man on the other side of the desk looked startled for a moment, as though unaccustomed to being addressed as "sir." Then he grinned, suddenly and startlingly.

"This is the place, isn't it?" he asked. "The place of refuge?"

Waverley looked intently at the thin, bright-eyed man. "This is Wild Talents, Incorporated," he said. "We're interested in any supernormal powers."

"I knew that," the man said, nodding his head vigorously. "That's why I escaped. I know you'll save me from them." He glanced fearfully over his shoulder.

"We'll see," Waverley said diplomatically, settling back in his chair. His young organization seemed to hold an irresistible

fascination for the lunatic fringe. As soon as he had announced his interest in psi functions and the like, an unending stream of psychotics and quacks had beat a path to his door.

But Waverley didn't bar even the obvious ones. Ridiculously enough, you sometimes found a genuine psi among the riffraff, a diamond in the rubbish. So —

"What do you do, Mr. —"

"Eskin. Sidney Eskin," the man said. "I am a scientist, sir." He drew his ragged jacket together, assuming an absurd dignity. "I observe people, I watch them, and note down what they are doing, all in strict accordance with the best scientific methods and procedure."

"I see," Waverley said. "You say you escaped?"

"From the Blackstone Sanitarium, sir. Frightened by my investigations, secret enemies had me locked up. But I escaped, and have come to you for aid and sanctuary."

Tentatively, Waverley classified the man as paranoidal. He wondered if Eskin would become violent if he tried to call Blackstone.

"You say you observe people," Waverley said mildly. "That doesn't sound supernormal —"

"Let me show you," the man said, with a sudden show of panic. He stared intently at Waverley. "Your secretary is in the reception room, seated at her desk. She is, at the moment, powdering her nose. She is doing it very delicately, applying the strokes with a circular motion. Now she is reaching forward, the powder box in her hand — ah! She has inadvertently spilled it against the typewriter. She says 'Damn!' under her breath. Now she —"

"Hold it," Waverley said. He hurried over and opened the door to the reception room.

Doris Fleet, his secretary, was mopping up spilled powder. Some of it had dusted her black hair a creamy white, giving her the appearance of a kitten that had rolled in flour.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she said.

"On the contrary," Waverley said. "I'm grateful." He didn't bother to explain, but closed the door and hurried back to Eskin.

"You will protect me?" Eskin asked, leaning over the desk. "You won't let them take me back?"

"Can you observe like that all the time?" Waverley asked.

"Of course!"

"Then don't worry about a thing," Waverley said, calmly, but with a pulse of excitement rising within him. Lunatic or not, Eskin wasn't going to waste his talents in any sanitarium. Not if Waverley had anything to do about it.

The intercom on his desk

EMSH

buzzed. He flipped the switch, and Doris Fleet said, "The reporters are here, Mr. Waverley."

"Hold them a moment," Waverley said, smiling to himself at her "official" tone of voice. He ushered Eskin to a little room adjoining his office. "Stay here," he told him. "Don't make any noise, and don't worry."

He closed the door, locked it, and told Doris to let the reporters in.

There were seven of them, pads out, and Waverley thought he could detect a certain grudging respect in their faces. Wild Talents, Inc., wasn't a back-page filler any more. Not since Billy Walker, Waverley's star psi, had aided the flight of the Venture to Mars with a terrific telekinetic boost. Since then, Wild Talents had been front page news.

Waverley had played it for all it was worth, holding back until he felt the maximum point of interest had been reached.

This was the point. Waverley waited until they were all quiet.

"Wild Talents, Incorporated, gentlemen," he told them, "is an attempt to find the occasional person among the general population who has what we call psi powers."

"What is a psi power?" a lanky reporter asked.

"It's difficult to define," Waverley said, smiling with what he hoped was perfect candor. "Let me put it to you this way —"

"*Sam!*" He heard Doris Fleet's voice in his head as clearly as though she were standing beside him. Although she might not be the best of secretaries, Doris *was* a telepath. Her ability worked only about twenty percent of the time, but that twenty percent sometimes came in useful.

"Sam, two of the men in your office. They're not reporters."

"What are they?" he thought back.

"I don't know," Doris told him. "But I think they might mean trouble."

"Can you get a line on what sort of trouble?"

"No. They're the ones in the dark suits. They're thinking —" Her thought died out.

Telepathy is lightning fast. The entire exchange had taken perhaps a second. Waverley spotted the two men, sitting a little apart from the rest, and taking no notes. He went on.

"A psi, gentlemen, is a person with some form of mental control or development, the true nature of which we can only guess at. Today, most psi's are to be found in circuses and sideshows. They lead, for the most part, unhappy, neurotic lives. My organization is trying to find the work that their special talents equip them for. Next we hope to discover why and how it works, and what makes

it so erratic. We want —"

He continued, laying it on thick. Public acceptance was a big factor in his work; a factor he had to have on his side. The public, stimulated by atomic power and enormously excited by the recent flights to the Moon and Mars, was prepared to accept the idea of psi, if it were made sufficiently understandable for them.

So he painted the picture in rosy colors, skipping over most of the stumbling blocks. He showed the psi, capable of dealing with his environment on a direct mental level; the psi, not a deviation or freak, but mankind fully realized.

He almost had tears in his eyes by the time he was through.

"To sum up," he told them, "our hope is that, someday, everyone will be capable of psi powers."

After a barrage of questions, the conference broke up. The two men in dark suits remained.

"Was there some further information you wanted?" Waverley asked politely. "I have some brochures —"

"Have you got a man named Eskin here?" one of the men asked.

"Why?" Waverley countered.

"Have you?"

"Why?"

"All right, we'll play it that way," one of the men sighed. They showed their credentials. "Eskin was confined in Blackstone Sanitarium. We have reason to believe he came here, and we want him back."

"What's wrong with him?" Waverley asked.

"Have you seen him?"

"Gentlemen, we're getting nowhere. Suppose I had seen him — and mind you, I'm not admitting it. Suppose I had a means of rehabilitating him, making a decent, worthy citizen out of him. Would you still insist on having him back?"

"You can't rehabilitate Eskin," one of the men told him. "He's found a perfectly satisfactory adjustment. Unfortunately, it's one that the public cannot countenance."

"What is it?" Waverley asked.

"Have you seen him?"

"No, but if I do, I'll get in touch with you," Waverley said pleasantly.

"Mr. Waverley. This attitude —"

"Is he dangerous?" Waverley asked.

"Not especially. But —"

"Has he any supernormal powers?"

"Probably," one of the men said unhappily. "But his method of using them —"

"Can't say I've ever seen the chap," Waverley said coolly.

The men glanced at each other. "All right," one of them said, "if you'll admit having him we'll

sign him over to your custody."

"Now you're talking," Waverley said. The release was quickly signed, and Waverley ushered the two men out. As they reached the door, Waverley saw what he thought was a wink pass between them. He must have imagined it, he decided.

"Was I right?" Doris asked him.

"Perfectly," Waverley said. "You've still got powder in your hair."

Doris located a mirror in her cavernous shoulder bag, and started dusting.

"Forget it," Waverley said, leaning over and kissing the tip of her nose. "Marry me tomorrow."

Doris considered for a moment. "Hairdresser tomorrow."

"Day after, then."

"I'm swimming the English Channel that day. Would next week be all right —"

Waverley kissed her. "Next week is not only all right, it's obligatory," he said. "And I'm not fooling."

"All right," Doris said, a little breathlessly. "But is this *really* it, Sam?"

"It is," Waverley said. Their wedding date had been postponed twice already. The first time, the problem of Billy Walker had come up. Walker hadn't wanted to go on the Venture to Mars, and Waverley had stayed with him day and night, bolstering his courage.

The next delay had been when Waverley found a wealthy backer for Wild Talents, Inc. It was 'round the clock work at first, organizing, contacting companies that might be able to use a psi, finding psis. But this time —

He bent over her again, but Doris said, "How about that man in your office?"

"Oh yes," Waverley said with mild regret. "I think he's genuine. I'd better see what he's doing." He walked through his office to the anteroom.

The psi had found pencil and paper, and was busy scribbling. He looked up when Waverley and Doris walked in, and gave them a wild, triumphant grin.

"Ah, my protector! Sir, I will demonstrate my scientific observations. Here is a complete account of all that transpired between A, you, and B, Miss Fleet." He handed them a stack of papers.

Eskin had written a complete account of Waverley's conversation with Doris, plus a faithful anatomical description of their kisses. He appended the physical data with a careful description of the emotions of both, before, during, and after each kiss.

Doris frowned. She had a love of personal privacy, and being observed by this ragged little man

didn't please her.

"Very interesting," Waverley said, suppressing a smile for Doris' sake. The man needed some guidance, he decided. But that could wait for tomorrow.

After finding Eskin a place to sleep, Waverley and Doris had dinner and discussed their marriage plans. Then they went to Doris' apartment, where they disregarded television until one o'clock in the morning.

Next morning the first applicant was a sprucely dressed man in his middle thirties, who introduced himself as a lightning calculator. Waverley located a book of logarithms and put the man through his paces.

He was very good. Waverley took his name and address and promised to get in touch with him.

He was a little disappointed. Lightning calculators were the least wild of the wild talents. It was difficult to place them in really good jobs unless they had creative mathematical ability to go with their computing skill.

The morning shipment of magazines and newspapers arrived, and Waverley had a few minutes to browse through them. He subscribed to practically everything, in hopes of finding little-known jobs that his psi's might fill.

An elderly man with the purple-veined face of an alcoholic came in next. He was wearing a good suit, but with ragged, torn cuffs. His new shirt was impossibly filthy. His shoes, for some reason, were shined.

"I can turn water into wine," the man said.

"Go right ahead," Waverley told him. He went to the cooler and handed the man a cup of water.

The man looked at it, mumbled a few words, and, with his free hand, made a pass at the water. He registered astonishment when nothing happened. He looked sternly at the water, muttered his formula again, and again made a pass. Still nothing happened.

"You know how it is," he said to Waverley. "We psi's, our power just goes off and on. I'm usually good about forty percent of the time."

"This is just an off-day?" Waverley asked, with dangerous calm.

"That's right," the man said. "Look, if you could stake me for a few days, I'd get it again. I'm too sober now, but you should see me when I'm really —"

"You read about this in the papers, didn't you?" Waverley asked.

"What? No, certainly not!"

"Get out of here," Waverley said. It was amazing, how many frauds his business attracted. People who thought he was dealing in some sort of pseudo-magic, people who thought he would be

an easy mark for a sad story.

There were entirely too many of them.

The next applicant was a short, stocky girl of eighteen or nineteen, plainly and unattractively dressed in a cheap print dress. She was obviously ill at ease.

Waverley pulled up a chair for her and gave her a cigarette, which she puffed nervously.

"My name's Emma Cranick," she told him, rubbing one perspiring hand against her thigh. "I— are you sure you won't laugh at me?"

"Sure; go on," Waverley said, sorting a batch of papers on his desk. He knew the girl would feel better if he didn't look at her.

"Well, I — this sounds ridiculous, but I can start fires. Just by wanting to. I *can!*" She glared at him defiantly.

A poltergeist, Waverley thought. Stone-throwing and fire-starting. She was the first one he had seen, although he had long been aware of the phenomenon. It seemed to center mostly in adolescent girls, for some unknown reason.

"Would you care to show me, Emma?" Waverley asked softly. The girl obliged by burning a hole in Waverley's new rug. He poured a few cups of water over it, then had her burn a curtain as a check.

"That's fine," he told the girl, and watched her face brighten. She had been thrown off her Uncle's farm. She was "queer" if she started fires that way, and her Uncle had no place for anyone who was "queer."

She was rooming at the YWCA, and Waverley promised to get in touch with her.

"Don't forget," he said as she started out. "Yours is a valuable talent — a very valuable one. Don't be frightened of it."

This time her smile almost made her pretty.

A poltergeist, he thought, after she had gone. Now what in hell could he do with a poltergeist girl? Starting fires . . . A stoker, perhaps? No, that didn't seem reasonable.

The trouble was, the wild talents were rarely reasonable. He had fibbed a bit to the reporters about that, but psi's just weren't tailor-made for the present world.

He started leafing through a magazine, wondering who could use a poltergeist.

"Sam!" Doris Fleet was standing in the door, her hands on her hips. "Look at this."

He walked over. Eskin had arrived, and was standing beside the reception desk, a foolish smile on his face. Doris handed Waverley a sheaf of papers.

Waverley read through them. They contained a complete account of everything he and Doris had done, from the moment he had walked into her apartment until he had left.

But complete wasn't the word. The psi had explored their every move and action. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, Waverley saw now why Eskin had been locked up.

The man was a voyeur, a peeping tom. A supernormal peeping tom, who could watch people from miles away.

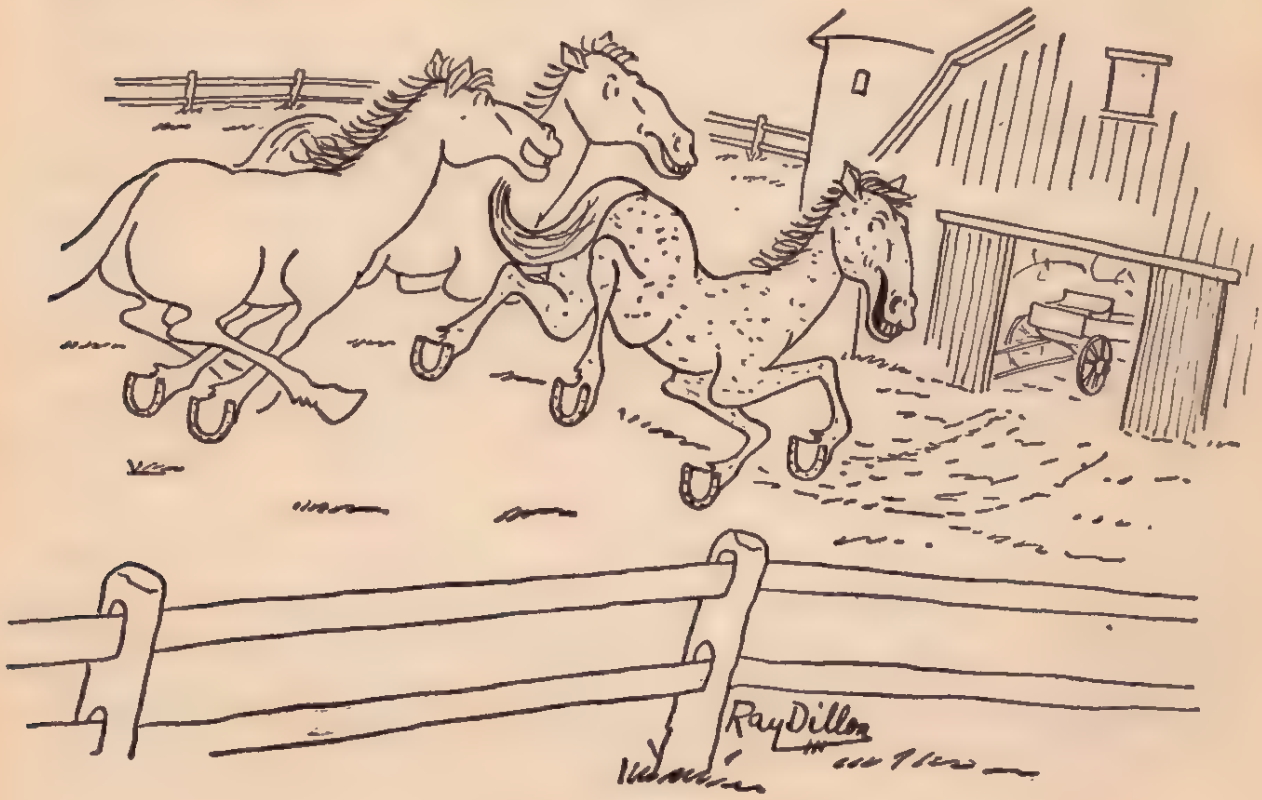
Like most couples on the verge of marriage, Waverley and Doris did considerable smooching, and didn't consider themselves any the worse for it. But it was something else again to see that smooching written down, dissected, analyzed.

The psi had picked up a complete anatomical vocabulary somewhere, because he had described every step of their courtship procedure in the correct terms. Diagrams followed, then a physiological analysis. Then the psi had probed deeper, into hormone secretions, cellular structures, nerve and muscle reactions and the like.

It was the most amazing bit of pornography-veiled-as-science that Waverley had ever seen.

"Come in here," Waverley said. He brought Eskin into his office. Doris followed, her face a study in embarrassment.

"Now then. Just what do you mean by this?" Waverley asked. "Didn't I save you from the asylum?"



"Last one in is . . ."

"Yes sir," Eskin said. "And believe me, I'm very grateful."

"Then I want your promise that there'll be no more of this."

"Oh, no!" the man said, horrified. "I can't stop. I have my research to consider."

In the next half hour Waverley discovered a lot of things. Eskin could observe anyone he came in contact with, no matter where they went. However, all he was interested in was their sex life. He completely rationalized this voyeurism by his certainty that he was serving science.

Waverley sent him to the anteroom, locked the door and turned to Doris.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," he said, "but I'm sure we can resublimate him. It shouldn't be too difficult."

"Oh, it shouldn't?" Doris asked.

"No," Waverley said, with a confidence he didn't feel. "I'll figure it out."

"Fine," Doris said. She put the psi's papers in an ashtray, found a match and burned them. "Until we do, I think we had better postpone the wedding."

"But why?"

"Oh, Sam," Doris said, "how can I marry you and know that slimy little *thing* is watching every move we make? And writing it all down?"

"Now calm down," Waverley said uncomfortably. "You're perfectly right. I'll go to work on him. Perhaps you'd better take the rest of the day off."

"I'm going to," Doris said, and started for the door.

"Supper this evening?" Waverley asked her.

"No," she said firmly. "I'm sorry, Sam, but one thing'll lead to another, and not while that peeping tom is loose." She slammed the door shut.

Waverley unlocked the anteroom door.

"Come in here, Sidney," he said. "You and I are going to have a fine long talk."

Waverley tried to explain, slowly and patiently, that what Eskin did wasn't truly scientific. He tried to show that it was a sexual deviation or overintensification, rationalized as a scientific motive.

"But Mr. Waverley," Eskin said, "if I was just peeking at people, that would be one thing. But I write it all down, I use the correct terms; I classify and define. I hope to write a definitive work on the sexual habits of every human being in the world."

Waverley explained that people have a right to personal privacy. Eskin replied that science came above petty squeamishness. Waverley tried to batter at his fortifications for the rest of the day. But, paranoid-like, Eskin had an answer for everything, an answer which fit completely into his view of himself and the world.

"The trouble is," he told Waverley, "people aren't scientific. Not even scientists. Would you believe it, in the Sanitarium the doctors kept me locked in solitary most of the time. Just because I observed and wrote down their sexual habits at home? Of course, being in solitary couldn't stop me."

Waverley wondered how Eskin had lived as long as he had. It would have been little wonder if an irate doctor slipped him an overdose of something. It probably required strong self-discipline not to.

"I didn't think that *you* were against me," the psi said sorrowfully. "I didn't realize that you were so old-fashioned."

"I'm not against you," Waverley said, trying to think of some way of dealing with the man. Then, in a sudden happy burst of inspiration, he had it.

"Sidney," he said, "I think I know of a job for you. A nice job, one you'll like."

"Really?" the voyeur said, his face lighting up.

"I think so," Waverley said. He checked the idea in a recent magazine, located a telephone number and dialed.

"Hello? Is this the Bellen Foundation?" He introduced himself, making sure they knew who he was. "I hear that you gentlemen are engaged in a new survey on the sexual habits of males of Eastern Patagonian descent. Would you be interested in an interviewer who can *really* get the facts?"

After a few more minutes of conversation, Waverley hung up and wrote out the address. "Go right over, Sid," he said. "I think we have found your niche in life."

"Thank you very much," the psychotic said, and hurried out.

The next morning Waverley's first appointment was with Bill Symes, one of Waverley's brightest hopes. Symes had a fine psi talent placed in a clear, intelligent mind.

This morning he looked confused and unhappy.

"I wanted to speak to you first, Sam," Symes said. "I'm leaving my job."

"Why?" Waverley wanted to know. He had thought that Symes was as well placed and happy as a psi could be.

"Well — I just don't fit in."

Symes was able to "feel" stresses and strains in metal. Like most psi's, he didn't know how he did it. Nevertheless, Symes was able to "sense" microshrinkage and porosity faster and more accurately than an X-ray machine, and with none of the problems of interpretation that an X-ray inspection leaves.

Symes talent was on an all-or-nothing basis; either he could do it, or he couldn't. Therefore he didn't make mistakes. Even

though his talent completely shut off forty percent of the time, he was still a valuable asset in the aircraft engine industry, where every part must be X-rayed for possible flaws.

"What do you mean, you don't fit in?" Waverley asked. "Don't you think you're worth the money you're getting?"

"It's not that," Symes said. "It's the guys I work with. They think I'm a freak."

"You knew that when you started," Waverley reminded him.

Symes shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Sam. Let me put it this way." He lighted a cigarette. "What in hell am I? What are any of us psi's? We can do something, but we don't know how we do it. We have no control over it, no insight into it. Either it's there, or it isn't. We're not supermen, but we're also not normal human beings. We're — I don't know what we are."

"Bill," Waverley said softly, "it's not the other men worrying you. It's you. *You* are starting to think you're a freak."

"Neither fish nor fowl," Symes quoted, "nor good red meat. I'm going to take up dirt farming, Sam."

Waverley shook his head. Psi's were easily discouraged from trying to get their talents out of the parlor-trick stage. The commercial world was built — theoretically — along lines of one hundred percent function. A machine that didn't work all the time was considered useless. A carry-over of that attitude was present in the psi's, who considered their talents a mechanical extension of themselves, instead of an integral part. They felt inferior if they couldn't produce with machine-like regularity.

Waverley didn't know what to do. Psi's would have to find themselves, true. But not by retreating to the farms.

"Look, Sam," Symes said. "I know how much psi means to you. But I've got a right to some normality also. I'm sorry."

"All right, Bill," Waverley said, realizing that any more arguments would just antagonize Symes. Besides, he knew that psi's were hams, also. They liked to do their tricks. Perhaps a dose of dirt-farming would send Bill back to his real work.

"Keep in touch with me, will you?"

"Sure. So long, Sam."

Waverley frowned, chewed his lip for a few moments, then went in to see Doris.

"Marriage date back on?" he asked her.

"How about Eskin?"

He told her about Eskin's new job, and the date was set for the following week. That evening they had supper together in a cozy little restaurant. Later they

returned to Doris' apartment, to resume their practice of ignoring television.

The next morning, while leafing through his magazines, Waverley had a sudden idea. He called Emma Cranick at once and told her to come over.

"How do you feel about travelling?" he asked the girl. "Do you enjoy seeing new places?"

"Oh, I do," Emma said. "This is the first time I've been off my Uncle's farm."

"Do you mind hardships? Bitter cold?"

"I'm never cold," she told him. "I can warm myself, just like I can start fires."

"Fine," Waverley said. "It's just possible . . ."

He got on the telephone. In fifteen minutes he had made an appointment for the poltergeist girl.

"Emma," he said, "have you ever heard of the Harkins expedition?"

"No," she said. "Why?"

"Well, they're going to the Antarctic. One of the problems of an expedition of that sort is heat for emergencies. Do you understand?"

The girl broke into a smile. "I think I do."

"You'll have to go down and convince them," Waverley said. "No, wait! I'll go down with you. You should be worth your weight in gold to an expedition like that."

It wasn't too difficult. Several women scientists were going on the expedition, and, after seven or eight demonstrations, they agreed that Emma would be an asset. Strong and healthy, she could easily pull her own weight. Self-warmed, she would be able to function in any weather. And her fire-making abilities . . .

Waverley returned to his office at a leisurely pace, a self-satisfied smile on his lips. Girls like Emma would be useful on Mars, someday when a colony was established there. Heat would be difficult to conserve in Mars' thin air. She was a logical choice for a colonist.

Things like that reaffirmed his faith in the future of psi. There was a place for *all* psi talents. It was just a question of finding the right job, or creating one.

Back in the office, a surprise was waiting for him. Eskin, the voyeur, was back. And Doris Fleet had a wrathful look in her eyes.

"What's wrong, Sid?" Waverley asked. "Back to pay us a visit?"

"Back for good," Eskin said unhappily. "They fired me, Mr. Waverley."

"Why?"

"They're not real scientists," Eskin said sadly. "I showed them my results on their test cases, and they were shocked. Can you

imagine it, Mr. Waverley? Scientists — shocked!"

Waverley suppressed a grin. He had always had a feeling that surveys of that sort uncovered about a sixteenth of the truth.

"Besides, they couldn't keep their scientific detachment. I ran a series of studies on the scientists' home lives for a control factor. And they threw me out!"

"That's a pity," Waverley said, avoiding Doris Fleet's look.

"I tried to point out that there was nothing wrong in it," Eskin said. "I showed them the series I've been running on you and Miss Fleet —"

"What?" Doris yelped, standing up so suddenly she knocked over her chair.

"Certainly. I keep my reports on all subjects," the psi said. "One must run follow-up tests —"

"That does it," Doris said. "I never heard such a — Sam! Throw him out!"

"What good will that do?" Waverley asked. "He'll just go on observing us."

Doris stood for a moment, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I won't stand for it!" she said suddenly. "I just won't!" She picked up her handbag and started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Waverley asked.

"To enter a nunnery!" Doris shouted, and disappeared through the door.

"She wasn't the girl for you anyhow," the psi said. "Extremely prudish. I've been observing your sexual needs pretty closely, and you —"

"Shut up," Waverley said. "Let me think." No answer sprang into his mind, full-blown. No matter what job he found for Eskin, the man would still go on with his observations. And Doris wouldn't marry him.

"Go into the other room," Waverley said. "I need time to think."

"Shall I leave my report here?" the psi said, showing him a stack of papers two inches thick.

"Yeah, just drop it on the desk." The psi went into the anteroom, and Waverley sat down to think.

Over the next few days, Waverley gave every available minute to the voyeur's problem. Doris didn't come back to work the next morning, or the morning after that. Waverley called her apartment, but no one answered.

The poltergeist girl left with the Antarctic expedition, and was given a big fanfare by the press.

Two telekinetic psi's were found in East Africa and sent to Wild Talents.

Waverley thought and thought.

A man dropped into the office with a trained dog act, and was very indignant to hear that Wild Talents was not a theatrical

agency. He left in a huff.

Waverley went on thinking.

Howard Aircraft called him. Since Bill Symes had left, Inspection had become the plant's worst bottleneck. Production had been geared to the psi's methods. When he was going good, Symes could glance at a piece of metal and jot down his analysis. The part didn't even have to be moved.

Under the older method of X-ray inspection, the parts had to be shipped to Inspection, lined up, put under the machine, and the plates developed. Then a radiologist had to read the film, and a supervisor had to pass on it.

They wanted Symes back.

The psi returned. He had his fill of farming in a surprisingly short time. Besides, he knew now that he was needed. And that made all the difference.

Waverley sat at his desk, reading over the voyeur's reports, trying to find some clue he might have missed.

The man certainly had an amazing talent. He analyzed right down to hormones and microscopic lesions. Now how in hell could he do that, Waverley asked himself. Microscopic vision? Why not?

Waverley considered sending Eskin back to Blackstone. After all, the man was doing more harm than good. Under psychiatric care, he might lose his compulsion — and his talent, perhaps.

But *was* Eskin insane? Or was he a genius, with an ability far beyond his age?

With a nervous shudder, Waverley imagined a line in some future history book: — "*Through his stupidity and rigidity in dealing with the genius Eskin, psi research was held up for* —" Oh, no! He couldn't chance that sort of thing. Let's see now, there had to be a way.

A man who could — of course!

"Come in here, Eskin," Waverley said to the potential genius.

"Yes sir," the psi said, and sat down in front of Waverley's desk.

"Sid," Waverley said, "how would you like to do a sexual report that would really aid science? One that would open a field never before explored?"

"What do you mean?" the psi asked dubiously.

"Look, Sid. Straight sexual surveys are old stuff. Everybody does them. Maybe not as well as you, but they still do them. Now would you like it if I could introduce you to an almost unexplored field of science? A field that would really test your abilities to the utmost?"

"I'd like that," the psi said. "But it would have to do with sex."

"Of course," Waverley said. "But you don't care what aspect of sex, do you?"

"I don't know," Eskin said.

"If you could do this — and I don't know that you can — your name would go down in history. You'd be able to publish your papers in the best scientific journals. No one would bother you, and you could get all the help you want."

"It sounds wonderful! What is it?"

Waverley told him, and watched Eskin closely. The psi considered. Then he said, "I think I could do that, Mr. Waverley. It wouldn't be easy, but if you really think that science —"

"I know so," Waverley said, in a tone of profoundest conviction. "You'll need some texts, to get some background on the field. I'll help you select them."

"I'll start right now!" the psi said, and closed his eyes for greater concentration.

"Wait a minute," Waverley said. "Are you able to observe Miss Fleet now?"

"I can if I want to," the psi said. "But I think this is more important."

"It is," Waverley told him. "I was just curious if you could tell me where she is."

The psi thought for a moment. "She isn't doing anything sexual," he said. "She's in a room, but I don't know where the room is. Now let me concentrate."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Eskin closed his eyes again. "Yes, I can see them! Give me pencil and paper!"

Waverley left him as Eskin began his preliminary investigations.

Now where had that girl gone? Waverley telephoned her apartment again, to see if she had come back. But there was no answer. One by one, he called all her friends. They hadn't seen her.

Where? Where in the world?

Waverley closed his eyes and thought: — *Doris. Can you hear me, Doris?*

There was no reply. He concentrated harder. He was no telepath, but Doris was. If she was thinking of him . . .

Doris!

Sam!

No message was necessary, because he knew she was coming back.

"Where did you go?" he asked, holding her tightly.

"To a hotel," she said. "I just waited there and tried to read your mind."

"Could you?"

"No," she said. "Not until the last, when you were trying, too."

"Just as well," Waverley said. "I'd never have any secrets from you. If you ever try anything like that again — I'll send the goblins out looking for you."

"I wouldn't want that," she said, looking at him seriously.

"I guess I'd better not leave again. But Sam — how about —"

"Come on in and look."

"All right."

In the other room, Eskin was writing busily on a piece of paper. He hesitated, then started scribbling again. Then he drew a tentative diagram, looked at it and crossed it out, and started another.

"What is he doing?" Doris asked. "What's that supposed to be a picture of?"

"I don't know," Waverley said. "I haven't studied their names. It's some sort of germ."

"Sam, what's happened?"

"Resublimation," Waverley said. "I explained to him that there were other forms of sex he could observe, that would benefit mankind and science far more, and win him endless prestige. So he's looking for the sex-cycle of bacteria."

"Without a microscope?"

"That's right. With his drive, he'll devour everything ever written about bacterial life. He'll find something valuable, too."

"Resublimation," Doris mused. "But *do* germs have a sex life?"

"I don't know," Waverley said. "But Eskin will find out. And there's no reason why he can't do some perfectly good research in the bargain. After all, the line between many scientists and peeping toms is pretty fine. Sex was really secondary to Eskin after he had sublimated it into scientific observation. This is just one more step in the same way." He cleared his throat carefully.

"Now would you care to discuss dates and places?"

"Yes — if you're sure it's permanent."

"Look at him." The psi was scribbling furiously, oblivious to the outside world. On his face was an exalted, dedicated look.

"I guess so." Doris smiled and moved closer to Waverley. Then she looked at the closed door. "There's someone in the waiting room, Sam."

Waverley kept back a curse. Telepathy could be damnably inconvenient at times. But business was business. He accompanied Doris to the door.

A young girl was sitting on a chair. She was thin, delicate, frightened-looking. Waverley could tell, by the redness of her eyes, that she had been crying recently.

"Mr. Waverley? You're the Wild Talents man?"

Waverley nodded.

"You have to help me. I'm a clairvoyant, Mr. Waverley. A real one. And you have to help me get rid of it. You must!"

"We'll see," Waverley said, a pulse of excitement beating in his throat. A clairvoyant!

"Suppose you come in here and tell me all about it."

Illustrator: Frank Delgado

return from Elba

By MACK REYNOLDS

There is a never-ending argument among the craftsmen — alleged and otherwise — of fiction, as to definitions. Some maintain hotly that there is no such thing as a science-fiction story, a western story, a fantasy, or any other kind; that there can be only the story itself, and that these definitive handles are but backgrounds against which a story is placed: that any piece of fiction conforming to the basic definition will fit into any of the commonly used backgrounds and appear to belong in that niche and no other: that the story's the thing!

"No Return From Elba" is laid in the future. Therefore it would probably be called science-fiction. But it could as easily have been placed in today or yesterday. All we're sure of is that good short-shorts are hard to come by — that "No Return —" is one of the best — that we're delighted to publish it.

THE Omnipotent entered and answered their salute as he had in the old days — as though there were still fleets under his command instead of this single space scout — planets still under his thumb, instead of the single tiny asteroid which lay before them.

His voice was still curt, demanding of unthinking obedience. "How long will it be now?"

"Perhaps an hour, Omnipotence." It was Klier who spoke; Klier the faithful; Klier, his hatchetman, his enforcer, during the years of power; Klier of the cold, vacant eyes.

The Omnipotent stared into the viewplate, his hands clasped behind his back. They knew — but he didn't know they knew — of his life-long fascination with the Bonaparte story. They recognized the Napoleonic stance, these last three of his followers, but their faces were blank.

He said, finally, "Voss, how big did you say this asteroid was?"

"A diameter, sire, of 1.784

miles." Voss alone wore civilian dress. Voss the mental wizard, the brain behind the throne.

"Ah, Voss, how accurate you are. Too bad you were not so accurate in estimating their military potential. Yes, too bad." There was a sneer in his voice, but he controlled himself. It would not do, at this late date, to antagonize them. For ten years it had been his privilege to ride roughshod over all, even his closest intimates, Klier, Voss, and Mannderman. But you never knew; even Ney, the incomparable Marshal Ney, had turned traitor in the time of stress.

So he said, "Gentlemen, you must forgive me. Your hearts are as heavy as my own." It was an unwonted concession.

Klier extended a hand, palm upward. "Sire —" he said. The others remained silent, but their faces reflected their thoughts. Thoughts of only yester-year. So short a time ago.

Later, when the supplies and equipment they had brought him were landed, the three gathered about him for the farewell.

The Omnipotent had been looking expressionlessly about the asteroid as they worked. It was very small. He muttered softly, "But there was Elba, and history repeats itself."

He straightened and faced them squarely. "There is no need to prolong this. You three will proceed to Venus and surrender. Our foe will not extradite. They want only me."

The three stood stiffly, listening, saying nothing.

"You will be humble on Venus — retiring — almost regretful and repentent. You will disappear from public view and interest."

He looked from one to the other. "And slowly, gentlemen, the atmosphere will change. My people will forget the sacrifices. They will remember — or think they remember — the glory, the prosperity, the flags and the parades. And within a few years the legends will begin to form. Nostalgia will grow. And concurrently our allied foes will be disintegrating. They will quarrel among themselves for the spoils, over the oil wells of Mars, the uranium of Gandymede." His voice tightened. "It is then I will rejoin you."

They had gone over it before so it was not new, but their eyes gleamed. "We hear, Omnipotence," they chanted, full voiced, the chant of the old days. "We hear, and we obey!"

"Are there any questions?"

They hesitated, momentarily, before Generalissimo Mannderman rumbled, "None, Sire."

There were no handshakes, no temporary breaking of the discipline of years. They saluted stiffly, about faced and headed for the scout-ship awkward in their space uniforms.

In moments the craft had blasted off and The Omnipotent turned and looked about his shrunken Empire again. "It *is* small," he said wryly. And then, after a reflective moment, "But I have waited before." He squared his thin shoulders and entered the asteroid's sole building.

On the center table stood a bottle of Martian *woji*. He grunted. That would be Klier. Klier would remember this bottle of his favorite beverage.

He picked it up and flicked the top from it . . .

On the space scout the three stood before the viewplate. A mushroom had blossomed from the asteroid behind them, blossomed and then enveloped it.

"He opened the bottle," Voss said.

Generalissimo Mannderman growled, "I still don't see why we had to go through with this farce. Why didn't we blast him down, here in the ship?" Red was creeping up from his stiff military collar. "The insults. The sneering deprecation. The forcing of blame on others . . ." His thick fingers twisted together in an ugly gesture.

Voss blinked at him and shook his head. "Impossible. That personality, that almost hypnotic power, that *force* he exercised." Slowly, he added, "I believe that even there at the end, if he had ordered me to shoot either of you, I would have obeyed."

The Generalissimo looked at him and wet his lips. But he was simmering down. Now he grunted agreement. "You're right. We couldn't have killed him as he stood before us." He emptied his lungs in a sigh of relief. "At least it's over now. He should have known the System would never stand for his return, no matter how long he waited. We — a triumverate — will one day return in his name. But he, himself? No. They wouldn't accept him alive."

Klier had remained silent thus far. Now he said thoughtfully, as he observed the last vestiges of the atomic explosion behind them, "I overestimated him. He had softened under adversity."

"How do you mean?"

"His plan shouldn't have involved *anyone* knowing of his hiding place. Not even us." Klier shook his head, as though in disappointment. "He should have attempted to liquidate us."

Generalissimo Mannderman took a small needlegun from a side pocket and looked at it reflectively. "You're right. And I was more or less expecting him to try. You see, I was prepared." He smiled grimly. The others smiled back. They turned away to go about their duties. And back in the engine room a small device was going tick, tick, tick . . .

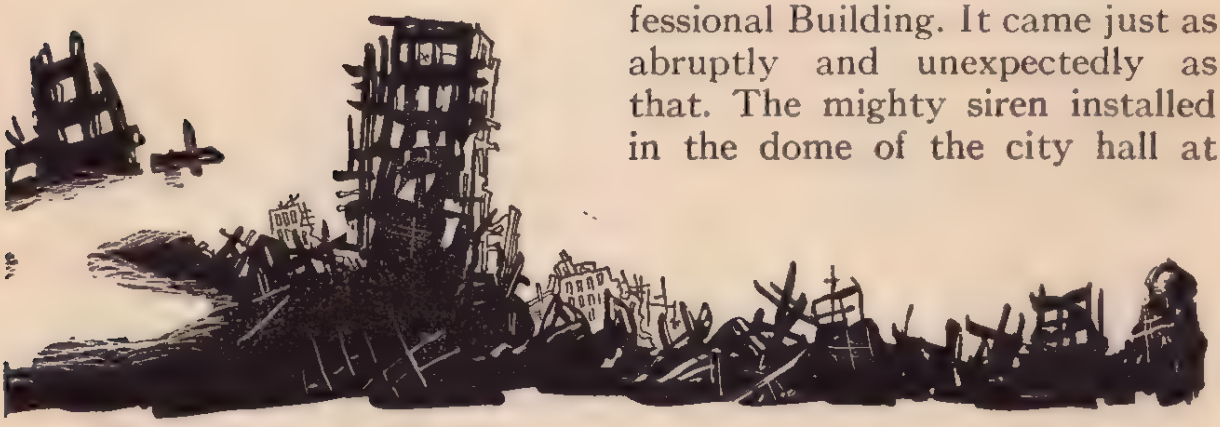
EMSH

A MOMENT FOR LAUGHTER

By PHILLIP LATHAM

The atom bomb is ever with us in fact and fiction, and will be until something more terrifying comes along. Many writers have handled in many ways, the forewarnings, the explosion, and the aftermath of the dread killer. The atom bomb is the subject used by Phillip Latham herein. What we like about Phil's stories is that they're so "people" if you get what we mean. Too many writers dwell on the gadget, the gimmick. Phil thinks of "things" only in relation to how they affect people. We go a little further into the subject of story construction in the introduction to "No Return From Elba", elsewhere in the book, so enjoy this one first.

IT WAS while Dr. Black was standing in the doorway politely motioning for Mrs. Titsworth to enter that it happened. The atomic bomb exploded half a mile over the Lake Avenue Professional Building. It came just as abruptly and unexpectedly as that. The mighty siren installed in the dome of the city hall at



considerable expense to the taxpayers failed to emit so much as a single warning bleat. From the charges and counter-charges hurled back and forth after the event it was quite clear that none of the officials had the slightest intimation that disaster was on its way.

The waiting room was illuminated by a light that made the sunshine streaming through the windows seem pale by comparison. For one paralysing moment nobody spoke or moved. Then there was action aplenty. Vance dived under the waiting room table and buried his face in his arms.

"Don't look anybody!" he yelled. "If we're still here after ten seconds we may come out of this alive. Now keep covered up while I count."

He drew a deep breath.

"One."

Nobody in the room moved.

"Two."

He continued counting slowly to ten. It seemed like an eternity. Nobody stirred even after he had reached ten.

"Are we still here?" he asked, peering between two fingers.

Dr. Black was standing in the doorway just as he was before the blast occurred. His expression was as impassive, his eyes as inscrutable, as ever. Sally, his nurse, was slightly behind him with one hand resting on his shoulder.

Vance got up and felt himself over. The two women huddled deep in their chairs gazed around them fearfully. Dorcas rose unsteadily from his seat by the window.

"Hit me right in the face," he declared. "I got the full force of it. Not a particle of protection."

"You look all right," Vance said, giving him a quick glance. "Kind of pale, though. Otherwise I'd say you came through with flying colors."

"Probably won't take hold for several days yet. I've read all about it. First your hair starts to fall out. Then you get sick at your stomach. Then you begin to bleed inside —"

"How about it, Dr. Black?" Vance interrupted. "How do we look to you?"

The doctor studied them with a professional eye. "You seem to have survived the shock remarkably well. In fact, judging from external appearances I should say that so far you have incurred no serious injuries whatever."

Vance sauntered over to his chair and lit a cigarette. "Say, folks, we couldn't have been mistaken, could we? That *was* an atomic bomb that went off, wasn't it?"

"I saw the flash," Dorcas said. "Like to put my eyes out. You can bet your bottom dollar that was an atomic bomb."

"I'm quite sure it was an atomic bomb," Dr. Black said.

Vance exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Then if it was an atomic bomb tell me this. Why aren't the windows broken? Why didn't we feel any shock? Why didn't we hear any noise?" He shook his head. "No, folks, it won't do. There's a piece missing somewhere."

They regarded one another in startled silence. Barbara Winchell was the first to speak.

"It's so still," she said, in a hushed voice. "I never knew it to be so still before. It's as still as death."

"Yeah," Dorcas growled, "there's something phony about this. Mighty strange if you ask me."

Dr. Black was examining the dial of his wristwatch. "My watch seems to have quit on me. I wonder if mine is the only one that has stopped."

"Looks like mine's stopped, too," Vance said, giving his watch a vigorous shake. "At exactly three-twenty. Doesn't want to go again either."

The others hastily compared watches. Although none was broken yet each had stopped within a minute or two of the same time. And nothing they could do would start them running.

Dr. Black turned to his assistant. "Will you fetch me my stethescope? There's a little experiment I'd like to try."

Sally brought him the instrument from the examination room. He adjusted the ear phones then nodded to Mrs. Titsworth. "Now if you'll come over here, please."

She regarded him doubtfully. "You mean you want to listen to me? You want to hear my heart?"

"If you don't mind."

He placed the bell upon her ample bosom and listen intently. "Just as I thought," he murmured presently, removing the earphones. "Evidently the same phenomenon again."

"Why, what do you mean?" she gulped.

For answer the doctor handed her the stethescope. "Listen to Miss Winchell and tell me what you hear."

Mrs. Titsworth hesitated, then awkwardly placed the tubes in her ears. With an apologetic smile she set the bell in the general vicinity of the young lady's stomach.

"I think you'll get better reception if you'll try it here," the doctor said, moving the instrument a few inches higher. "There. Now listen carefully and tell me what you hear."

Mrs. Titsworth listened with the rapt expression of a housewife who has just taken down the receiver on a party line when a particularly juicy bit of conversation was in progress. Gradually her expression gave way to one of puzzled bewilderment.

"Why, I can't hear anything," she exclaimed. "She's all still inside. Just like she was dead."

All eyes were fixed on the girl. She looked stricken. Her face was so pale that her lipstick seemed black by contrast.

"Say, what's going on here?" Vance demanded. "Let me have that thing. I'd like to tune in on this myself."

He seized the stethescope and applied it to Dorcas' chest. After several seconds he readjusted the earphones and listened again. Then he removed the instrument and laid his ear directly against the man's body. After which he straightened up slowly.

"It's true," he said, in a husky voice. "There isn't a sound. As if he were already dead."

He stood silent for a moment fingering the earphones. Suddenly he whirled on the doctor.

"You act as if you know so much. What's the meaning of all this? For God's sake tell us what's going on here."

Dr. Black made a deprecating gesture. "You greatly overestimate my capabilities. I was only guessing when I thought of listening to your heart just now. If I had told you what I suspected in advance and it turned out to be wrong you would have accused me of frightening you unnecessarily. It was a rather difficult situation."

"I can imagine it was," Vance commented drily. "But it can't be worse than the state we're in already. So if you don't mind . . ."

"Yeah, let's lay all our cards on the table," Dorcas broke in. "Know the worst and get it over with. That's my motto."

The doctor frowned as if undecided as to the best way to begin. "The effects following the sudden release of such a tremendous amount of energy as is contained in the atomic bomb is still imperfectly understood. In fact, the whole theory of the development, formation, and evolution of the blast wave following the explosion is in a highly unsatisfactory state. It must be obvious, however, that if you suddenly heat a small region of space to a temperature of several hundred thousand degrees that something extraordinary is likely to happen. Thus the shock wave propagated at the boundary of such a region —"

"Look, Dr. Black, someday when you're not so busy we can have a long talk about the shock wave and all that," Dorcas said, with a trace of irritation in his voice. "But couldn't you give us the main course and leave off the fancy trimmings?"

"I'm sorry," the doctor apologized, "I was merely trying to sketch in some of the background. The point is merely this: that some very curious effects occurred near the site of the atom bomb explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, similar to those we have witnessed here. Because of the extraordinary nature of these ef-

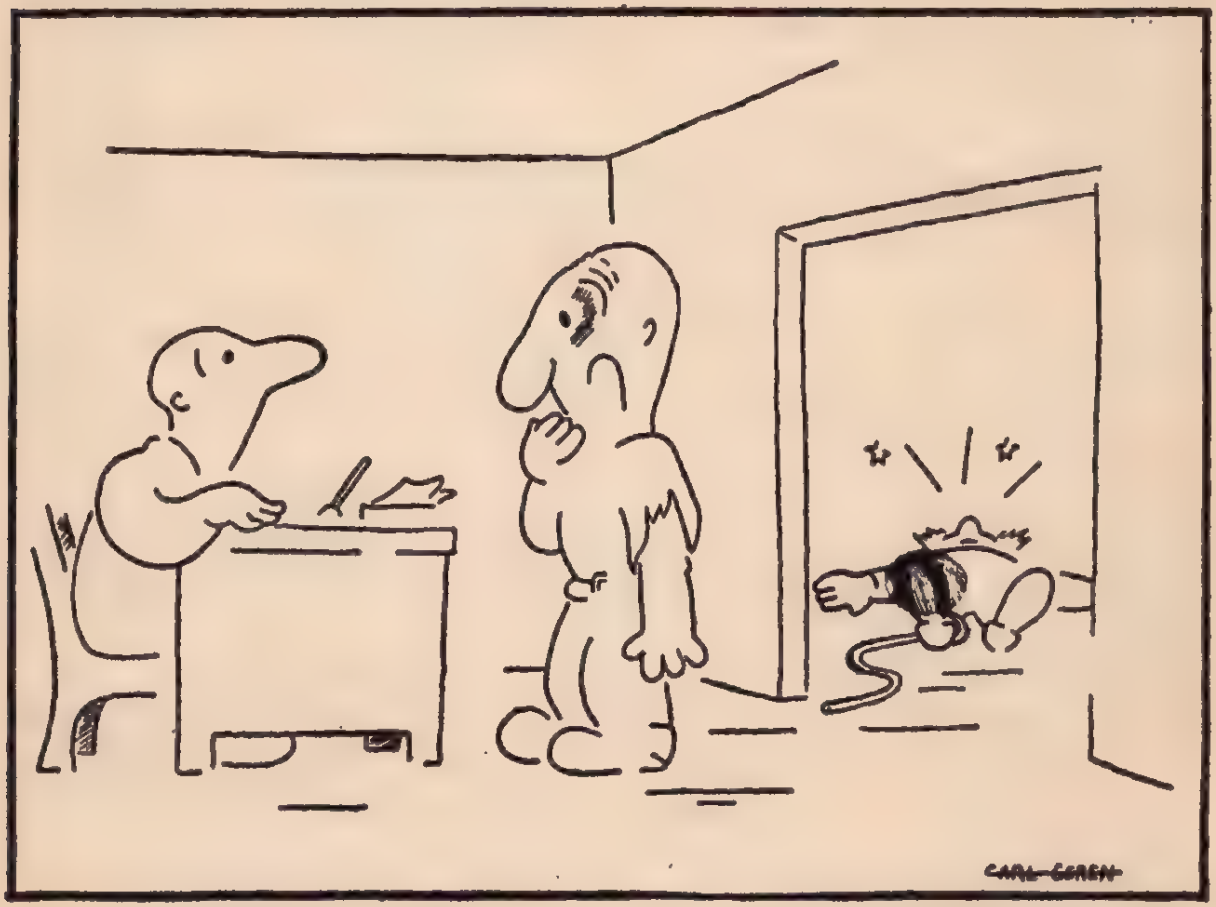
fects and because they were observed by only a few people, the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission deemed it inadvisable to make this material public. I may say that these effects were observed only by individuals in reinforced concrete buildings such as this one near ground zero."

"I always did think they were holding something back," Mrs. Titsworth declared. "It's just like my milkman says — you can't believe what's in the paper these days."

"I recall particularly one Japanese woman, a typist, who described effects identical with those we have experienced here," Dr. Black continued. "The absence of sound, for example; the lack of damage to the building, and especially the fact that our watches have apparently stopped. I say 'apparently' because it is my belief that our watches are still running as usual. Similarly, I think our hearts are still beating even though the sound cannot be heard through the stethescope."

"Then what the hell —" Dorcas muttered.

"The effect produced consists of what might be termed a state of suspended animation in time," the doctor hurried on. "That is,



"EPSTEIN! Gosh! I thought you said, 'Get me EINSTEIN'."

for a period not exceeding perhaps a millionth of a second an individual feels that he is living for as long as an hour. He is as it were isolated — encysted — in a tiny cell in time. For an instant he feels no effects of the explosion. As he returns to normal space-time relationships he sees the windows shattered, the crumble, and all the other results of the cataclysm."

"You mean to tell us the explosion is still going on?" Dorcas demanded. "Only we can't see or feel it?"

"Exactly," Dr. Black replied. "But instead of being knocked out immediately you will be able to watch its effects develop at your leisure. You are to be congratulated upon being accorded such a unique opportunity. One seldom has a chance to discuss the meaning of human existence while he is well on his way to being blasted into eternity."

"But everything looks just the same," Mrs. Titsworth told him. "It feels just the same. I can't believe —"

"Except for your heart," Dr. Black reminded her softly. "Don't forget your heart."

She pressed her hand over that organ. "My heart always has been kind of funny. Sometimes it tumbles around so I can hardly get my breath. But I made up my mind I just wasn't going to let it upset me. It's my experience that things generally work out if you leave 'em alone and don't let 'em get you down. I don't understand all this talk about atoms and such. The less we have to do with such awful things in my opinion the better. We got along without 'em when I was a girl and we'd be a lot happier if we could forget about 'em today."

"Look here, Black," Dorcas said, getting ponderously to his feet. "You can't make me believe we're stuck here for the next couple of hours without any chance of getting out. As this lady says, everything looks about the same to me as it always has. My watch has stopped before. I don't know much about this heartbeat business but I'm willing to bet money that if my heart wasn't ticking away I wouldn't be here talking about it now."

He removed a cigar from his pocket and bit off the end. "I'm a busy man, Dr. Black. Got to get back to the office. Got lots of things to do. So if you'll look me over and prescribe something for this gas I've been having lately —" He was barely in time to smother an unexpected belch.

"I'd be happy to do what I can for you," Dr. Black assured him, "but you're behaving like a patient who complains of a hangnail after some major surgery. I'm afraid that you fail to comprehend the gravity of your situation."

Dorcas bit savagely on his cigar. "There's just one thing I want to know. Are you going to look after us or aren't you? If not, I'm getting out immediately."

Dr. Black indicated the door. "You are at liberty to leave any time you please."

Dorcas gave the doctor a curt nod, smothered another belch, and opened the door. He started across the threshold, then stopped suddenly with his hand still clutching the doorknob.

"Good lord," he gasped, drawing back. "Something has happened."

"What's this?" Vance said, jumping up.

"Don't ask me," Dorcas shook his head weakly. "Go see for yourself."

They all crowded around the open door. For several feet outside the hall appeared as usual. There were the same blank doors in front of the elevator shafts with push-buttons in between and arrows over the top to indicate the floors. One door was standing open revealing the cage with the passengers inside, men and women with that deadpan expression on their faces that people wear in elevators. Except that this time the expression looked as if it were painted on. The passengers stood as still as statues gazing dumbly at the back of one another's heads. Only you knew that they weren't statues but flesh-and-blood people frozen into a split second of time.

The building vanished a few feet beyond the elevator shaft. The outline was as sharp as if it had been cut out of paper. On the other side was blackness. Blackness as deep as the profundity of inter-galactic space.

Dorcas shut the door and leaned back against it breathing heavily.

"Damndest thing I ever saw," he muttered. He wove his way uncertainly back to his chair.

"Oh, what's the use of pretending?" Vance cried. "Trying to make ourselves believe everything is still the same. We're as good as dead right now. The only one of us who has a chance of escaping is this girl here. She was sitting in the corner with the *Saturday Evening Post* in front of her face when the bomb exploded so she had the most protection." He gave her a wry smile. "Good thing it wasn't *quick*."

Dr. Black stood in the middle of the room with his arms folded and his legs apart surveying them quizzically. There was neither malice nor satisfaction in his eyes. Only a kind of intent watchfulness.

"Ordinarily we can find some means of escape from practically any situation that arises," he said, speaking more to himself than to the occupants of the room. "The present situation is an exception to the rule. As I have said,

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we are stranded in a little cell isolated in space and time. The atomic explosion is still in progress around us. We are not yet aware of its effects but we will be. When we return to normal I regret to inform you that you will in all probability be destroyed, although Miss Winchell may escape. There is nothing that you can do to alter that situation in the slightest degree. You are completely at the mercy of your environment."

He made the statement in the same matter-of-fact tone that he might have used to tell a filling station attendant to put a quart of oil in the car.

No one replied. Dorcas had relit his cigar and sat puffing on it grimly. Vance was slumped back in his chair with his legs dangling over the side. Mrs. Titsworth with her hands folded in her lap was calmly regarding the picture of *The Horse Fair* on the opposite wall.

"I'm glad," Barbara Winchell whispered. "Now you're just like me. Now you know how it feels when you're trapped and you can't escape."

She turned on them defiantly. Her eyes were shining and there was a bit of color in her cheeks.

"I'm going to have a baby. A baby I don't want. I've been to half a dozen doctors but none of

them will touch me. They sit there and look at me as if I were someone apart. As if I were diseased or not quite clean.

"I've heard that Dr. Black is different from the others. That's the reason I came here today. I thought he might help me . . . might be willing to do something . . ." She broke down unable to go on.

Dr. Black regarded her with something approaching pity in his eyes. But when he spoke his voice was quite without emotion.

"I get a good many cases like yours. For some reason they always come to me in the end. I'm very sorry but I can't solve your problem. There really is nothing I can do for you."

"If you didn't help me I was going to kill myself," she said tonelessly. "That's why I'm glad. Now I don't have to think of it anymore. Now it's all been done for me."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Mrs. Titsworth put her hand on the girl's arm.

"Where's the baby's father?" she asked. "Won't he help any?"

The girl shook her head.

"You mean he's lit out and left you this way?"

The girl nodded vigorously.

"Why, the wretch!" Mrs. Titsworth exclaimed indignantly. Under her scrutiny the girl withdrew farther into the recesses of her chair.

"What about your folks?" Vance inquired. "Have you told them?"

The girl laughed harshly. "You don't know my mother and father. Such things don't happen in families like ours. They couldn't stand what people would say."

"Tell 'em to go to the devil."

"That's easy to say. It's not so easy to do."

Mrs. Titsworth sighed. "There's been times when I've wondered what I'd do if anything like that ever happened in our family. I guess every parent does. My Matilda used to be kind of wild when she was going out with the boys. It's something awful the way the young folks carry on these days. They just don't seem to *care*. But she settled down finally and married a secondhand car dealer over in Monrovia. Got three boys and a girl — a finer family you never saw in your life. That's what I always say. Things will work out all right if you leave 'em alone and don't let 'em upset you too much."

"The way I see it is like this," Dorcas rumbled, chewing thoughtfully on his cigar. "Human nature being what it is we've always had cases like this and I expect we'll keep on having 'em for quite a while yet. Young folks will have their fun and sometimes those that aren't so young," he chuckled, with a broad wink at Vance. "The way things are now there's no

regular business-like method for handling such matters. No system or reason about it at all."

"What would you suggest?" said Vance.

"Don't know as I can say right off. Never given it much thought before. But I'd work out some kind of a deal. If you've got the money and the will to do it you can pull practically anything."

He waved his cigar in the doctor's direction. "Tell me, doc, just why is it now you can't do something for this little lady? It ain't so much of an operation, is it?"

"There happens to be a law against it," Black said shortly. "Not only is the doctor guilty but the woman is incriminated as well. No reputable physician would touch such a case."

"Sure. Sure. There's a law against it. Well, there's some fool law against about everything you want to do these days. A man's got to hire a lawyer if he wants to stay in business any more.

"Now why don't you forget all about what it says in the books and go ahead, eh? Pretty hard to pin those things down in court, I'll bet. And I guess none of us here is going to tell." He glanced at his three companions.

"Well, I don't know about that," Mrs. Titsworth said. "I guess I'm old fashioned but I can't help it. In my opinion it's a crime against nature and nothing is ever going to change my opinion."

She gave the girl a motherly pat on the shoulder. "Why don't you go right ahead and have your baby? Things will work out somehow, honey. And they do say those love children are the prettiest."

"Well, there you are," said Dorcas, throwing up his hands. "The doc here could take her in the back room. Have it all done in half an hour. The girl would be happy. The doc would make some money. And if we all kept our big mouths shut who'd be the wiser?"

"I'm afraid you're forgetting," Dr. Black interposed, "that it can't make the slightest difference whether I should perform the operation or not. Remember that you still cannot escape from that atom bomb explosion. You still are powerless to change that situation."

Even as he spoke they were aware of some subtle change in their surroundings. The sunlight streaming in through the windows was fading to a dull saffron yellow. The windows themselves appeared to be dissolving before their eyes. The glass was turning from a solid sheet into countless fragments floating through the air like bits of tissue paper.

"We're coming out of it," Vance cried. "Look! See that crack in the wall over there."

As they watched a gaping fissure opened near the window and crept

stealthily inward toward the door. The whole wall was heaving and twisting like a sheet of cardboard. At the same time their ears were assaulted by a deep roar rolling on and on like the crack of doom.

Dorcas struggled to his feet and gazed wildly around him. "We've got to do something. Got to fight this. I'll call the office . . ."

He hurried over to the telephone and dialed a number with shaking hands.

"Phone's dead," he muttered. "Have to call later. When things get fixed up again."

"That's right," Mrs. Titsworth nodded, seizing eagerly upon his words. "Later on — when things get fixed up again."

"Later on!" Vance cried. "Can't you understand? There isn't any later on. We've only minutes — maybe seconds — left. Our time is all used up. There's nothing left but now."

He turned to the doctor who was studying them quietly from the doorway. "All right, we're caught. The bomb has exploded and we can't do a thing to change it. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen and we'll have to stand the consequences. There's only one thing left in this world that we can change and that's ourselves. Remember, Dr. Black — we can still think."

He walked over to the girl who was sitting in the corner unmindful of the disturbance.

"You're the only one who has a chance to come out of this alive. You hold the only winning cards in the deal. It isn't much of a chance but you've got to take it. And play it for all it's worth.

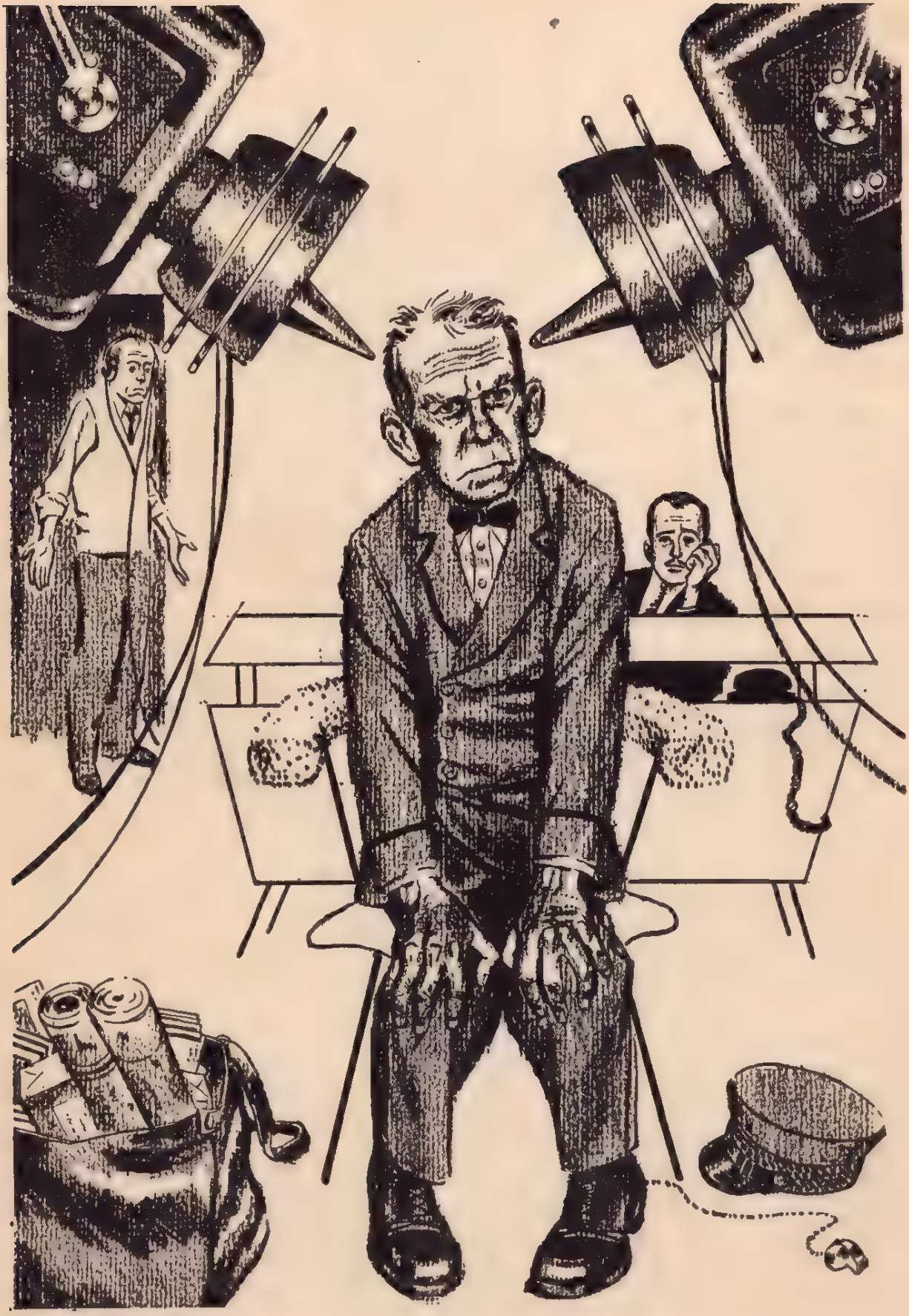
"You've got to have your baby. Understand? We've got to keep on. There's no turning back. There's never any turning back. Oh, sometimes people try to stop the clock but they never really do. They may hold back the world for a few cosmic seconds but then it bursts out and flows on again faster than before.

"People say the atom bomb is going to destroy the world. That there's no hope left. Well I say they're crazy. The world is going on for millions of years yet. And there's always hope left. As long as we're free to think."

He turned abruptly and went back to his chair. The girl reached for a magazine and began slowly turning the pages. But her eyes were far from the printed words.

Time was coming back fast now. The world of reality was closing in on them like a devouring tide. The building rocked and shook. Mingled with the crash of glass and screams from the hall was the deep roar of the explosion rolling on and on.

Dr. Black nodded to his helper. Almost wearily she followed him across the room to the patients who had been waiting to receive him.



Illustrator: David Stone

SECRET WEAPON

By IVAR JORGENSEN

You know that right and justice always win out, of course? You don't? Well now, where have you been? There is ample proof that the baddies can't run up a score worth shucks. Of course they do have certain abilities. They start with a big sneer for the hero and then follow it up by kicking his front teeth out and then fracturing his skull for the sin of objecting. Then they may break his legs with the butt of a .45 or with a ring post (this depends upon whether the action takes place in a wrestling ring or in the Great Open Spaces à la Hopalong Cassidy) and then they really get down to business and rough him up. But they can never win that last battle. Joe King, our hero in Secret Weapon, met some baddies all right. But in the end he — in the end — Great Shades! We've violated the formula!

THEY don't get any mail."

"What, darling?"

"I was talking to you. I said — they don't get any mail."

"Now isn't that peculiar!"

Joe King set down his coffee cup and frowned across the breakfast table at Marcia. She made a pretty picture in her flowered dressing gown and honey-colored hair. But Joe frowned nonetheless. He felt that his wife could have shown a little interest in the punchline of his story. "You haven't been listening to me."

Marcia looked up brightly from her half of the morning paper. "They've invented a new washing machine — it says here. A machine that agitates the water with

sound waves instead of paddles. It costs about half the price of —" Marcia caught Joe's sour expression. "What were you saying, dear?"

"I was telling you about a company on my route that doesn't get any mail."

Marcia, aware now of the irritated tone in his voice, folded her paper and laid it aside. "I wasn't listening, darling. Tell me."

But Joe felt himself entitled to more of an apology than that. Even though he stood six feet without his shoes on, he was a small man in many ways; in material progress; in personal ambition; in mental scope and imagination. He got up suddenly and reached for his uniform jacket. "It wasn't very important. A new company moved into one of the buildings along my route. They've been there two weeks and they haven't gotten any mail. Not even a post card."

Marica looked a trifle confused and this annoyed Joe even more. If she'd listened in the first place, she'd realize that he — through alertness and personal observation — had come upon something very peculiar.

"What company, Joe?"

"Oh it doesn't matter much, I guess."

"Where did you say they were located?"

He realized Marcia was trying to make amends and he felt guilty at his own peevishness. "The Channon Building on Washington Street. I'm going in there today and see what they look like." He adjusted his cap and pulled down the skirt of his jacket.

"But why worry about it," Marcia said. "There's no law against not getting any mail."

"You've got to admit it's damned strange, though. Maybe they're spies or something. Reds. Every citizen has to be on the alert these days." He bent over and kissed his wife on the forehead. "Bye, angel," he said, and glanced at his watch as he went out.

While walking the two blocks to the subway, Joe remembered this was the day of Marcia's appointment with Doctor Hayden. He should have mentioned it — given her a word of encouragement. Then his mind became occupied with the big question. Would Korbo Associates get any mail today?

It wasn't any great and towering intrigue, to be sure, but Joe savored it for two reasons. First, it was all his own. If Korbo Associates turned out to be — well, say a nest of subversives or something, he, Joe King, mailman, was the only person in town who suspected it. Secondly, a mailman's routine was dull at best, and anything that tended to break the unending monotony was indeed welcome.

He bought another paper at the subway to read on the way downtown, and tried resolutely to concentrate on the news. It hadn't changed any from the previous morning. An attractive young blonde had killed her husband for coming home late. There was a picture of her looking properly disheveled. A man had used a knife on his wife because she refused to tell him where she spent her afternoons. There was a picture of the wife in a bathing suit.

Joe noted that the Democrats were mad at the Republicans, the dairy interests were mad at the oleomargine people, and that Mr. Vishinsky was mad at everybody. The same old stuff.

Joe got off the train at 69th Street and punched in at the post office. He took his bag and walked three blocks to the first box in which mail for his route had been deposited from the delivery truck. He moved along briskly, doing two hours work in an hour and a half, thus bringing himself to his third relay box at nine-thirty.

The mail was divided into three bundles. He started to unstrap the second bundle — mail slated for the Channon Building — then quite suddenly, he stopped. This was childish. There could be any number of reasons why Korbo Associates received no mail.

But Joe King couldn't think of any off-hand. He put the bundles into his sack and continued his rounds. As he approached the Channon Building, however, his anticipation had again sharpened. He stopped on the floor below the Korbo and ran through the pack. He experienced a distinct thrill.

There was nothing for the Korbo establishment.

Joe by-passed the elevator and climbed the stairs to the floor above. He stood for a few moments in the hallway, feeling suddenly let-down. So there wasn't any mail for them. Was he being silly? What was he going to do about it? Walk in and accuse them of something or other? Of what? Of not being on anyone's mailing list?

He approached the glass paneled door and stared at it. It told him nothing. Then, quite suddenly, he opened the door and stepped inside.

He found himself in a low-ceilinged six-by-six cubicle that evidently passed as a waiting room. A door on the far side led into the offices proper. On one side a small glass window was set into the wall. Joe went over and took a look.

A girl was seated at a desk inside. Before her was a heap of magazines. She had a pair of scissors and was industriously cutting out small sections of the pages. A clipping bureau? Joe wondered. Possibly, but a clipping bureau should certainly have

a lot of correspondence with the outside world.

The girl looked up, saw Joe, and smiled. She arose and came to the window. It swung back on hinges. "Is there something I can do for you?" she asked.

Joe tried to think of something and failed. "No — no, I guess not. I was just going by."

"You're the mailman, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm the mailman."

"Do you have anything for us?"

"No, not a thing."

The girl's smile flashed off and on pleasantly. "Tomorrow, maybe."

"Yeah, maybe tomorrow."

The girl closed the window and went back to her scissors. Joe went out and delivered two catalogues and three letters to the people next door.

That night, at dinner, Marcia obviously tried to make amends for her earlier lack of interest. "That place you were talking about," she asked. "Did they get any mail today?"

"No, but it isn't important. What did the doctor say?"

A shadow of worry passed over Marcia's face. "He's still making tests. 'Exploratory,' he calls it. I've got to go back next week."

"Maybe we'd better change doctors."

Marcia shook her head. "Not for a while at least. I've got faith in Doctor Hayden." She looked up suddenly, the worry still on her face. "Joe, what are you going to do about those — those people?"

"Korbo Associates? I don't know exactly. Keep an eye on them, I guess. I kind of feel it's my duty as a citizen."

"I wish you wouldn't."

Joe was surprised. "Why, angel? Don't you think with Red spies being turned up — "

"That's just it. What if they are spies? It could be dangerous."

Joe had a stubborn chin. Now his mouth straightened, thus putting two stubborn items on his face. "That's the wrong attitude, Marcia. With our boys fighting and dying in Korea, a little vigilance at home is important. It's the least a man can do. I've got to watch them until I'm sure something's wrong. Then I'll report them to the FBI."

"But maybe there's nothing out of the way. Maybe they run some kind of a business where they don't get any mail."

"I'm pretty sure on that point," Joe said grimly. "And I want to know what kind of a business it is."

"It seems so silly. Suspecting people because nobody writes to them."

"You've got to admit it looks pretty peculiar."

"Yes, I guess it does. That's what scares me. Suppose they're

vicious characters and they catch you snooping around — "

"I went into their anteroom today. They look harmless enough. All I saw was a girl cutting up magazines."

Marcia sighed. "Well, let's hope they start getting some mail. Then maybe you'll quit snooping and stay out of trouble."

During the following week, Joe King knew the taste of frustration. Korbo Associates continued their isolated existence. But Joe couldn't figure out what to do about it. He had no proof of wrong-doing. He had thought vaguely of calling the firm to the attention of the FBI. But what could he accuse them of? He had a dread of being shown up as a fool and even pondered the possibility of being sued by Korbo Associates for false accusation or whatever it was that people sued for under such circumstances.

Then, on Saturday, he delivered a sizable bundle of mail to the girl behind the little glass window. She took it with a bright smile while two men stood in the background and beamed approval.

It was the first time Joe had proof that the firm consisted of anyone but the girl and he eyed the men narrowly. One was tall, dark, and slim. He had a small black mustache and a healthy coat of tan. Possibly his blue pinstripe suit wasn't expensive but he made it look that way.

The other man was somewhat older and had less of the appearance of a collar ad. He was prosperous looking, however, and wore his blonde hair and mustache with an air of authority.

That night, Joe confronted Marcia with an air of grim determination. "I'm going to talk to the FBI," he said.

"About those people in the Channon Building?"

"Yes. They got a lot of mail today."

Marcia exhibited understandable confusion. "You delivered mail to them?"

"A big bundle of it."

"Then why are you going to report them? You were upset because they didn't get any. Now that everything's all right, you're going to the FBI."

"Everything's not all right. I've been a mailman too long not to spot a phony setup. Do you know what happened?"

"No; tell me."

"They must have realized things looked queer. They realized it the day I looked in and saw the girl cutting magazines. You know what she was doing? Clipping coupons and mailing them out so they'd get some mail in return. Every letter I took them today was the same type. Some advertiser's reply to an inquiry."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"I've delivered too many of them not to know."

Marcia was truly frightened. She laid a hand on Joe's arm. "Joe, I'm afraid. Please drop the whole thing. Now that you're sure something's wrong — "

"But Marcia, I — "

"I know," she said, almost angrily. "Your duty as a citizen and all that. Well, you have a duty to me, too. I'm your wife. If anything happened to you — "

"Nothing's going to happen, baby. You're just upset. Your nerves are raw and I think you're losing weight. When's that damn doctor going to tell us what's wrong with you?"

Marcia dropped wearily into a chair. "It's some form of anemia," she said. "He's putting me on a diet. I'll be all right. It's you I'm worried about. If you get mixed up with a lot of vicious people. Suppose they're not spies — just vicious criminals? Your life wouldn't mean a thing to them!"

"You let me worry about that."

"Darling! Think it over at least. Please don't do anything rash."

"I'll take you for a drive in the country tomorrow," Joe said. "You've got to get some sunshine. You'll feel better when you get a little color."

Marcia didn't question whether or not the two went together and nothing more was said about Korbo Associates for the next two days. On Monday, Joe had another sheaf of mail for Korbo Associates. He took it in and handed it to the girl. She smiled, as usual, and said, "Mr. Korbo would like to talk to you."

The words caught Joe's mind off balance. He rocked back on his mental heels and said, "W-who — me?"

"Yes, he thought you might possibly have a little time after you finish your rounds. If you could drop back — ?"

The scissor-girl's eyes made it a cordial invitation supercharged with possibilities, but Joe decided her eyes were just made that way. He said, "Well — okay — I guess I can — "

"Fine. It's settled then. What time can we expect you?"

"I get through at one o'clock.

"... and one hamburger—rare."

About one-thirty maybe."

"We'll be expecting you," she said brightly, and closed the window.

Several people got other people's mail on the remaining stretch of Joe's route. He couldn't seem to keep his mind on his work. His reaction was a mixture of personal pride and anticipation. He'd been right! There *was* something about Korbo Associates that didn't meet the bright light of day. Or was there? Maybe the invitation was just a huge coincidence. Mailmen had been approached before about making a list of the people on their routes for listing companies. Feeling the weight of his responsibility, Joe decided to withhold judgment until all the evidence was in. He'd read such advice in the newspapers, given by civic leaders relative to alleged criminals in the public spotlight. It was good advice, he decided.

Joe got back to the Channon Building twenty minutes after he'd hung up his bag. The girl let him in immediately and ushered him through an inner door. The tall dark man was waiting. "Good of you to come," he said, cordially. "Won't you sit down?" Then, almost as an afterthought: "I'm Mr. Korbo."

Joe sat down in the chair Korbo indicated and looked around the room. Certain of the furnishings could, at the very least, have been termed peculiar. Joe was seated at the focal point of two small machines that resembled X-ray projectors. They might have been something entirely different, however, because Joe King didn't feel himself qualified to call them by name. Also, he didn't feel it necessary to ask questions because the machine didn't seem to be functioning at the moment.

"Have a cigar," Korbo said, extending a satinwood box.

"Thanks," Joe said. "Don't mind if I do."

Korbo saw to the lighting and then sat down behind his desk and said, "I suppose you've been wondering what kind of business we're in, Mr. King."

"Well — I've kind of — "

Korbo laughed gently. "That was rather stupid of us — leaving ourselves open to suspicion through so obvious a thing as mail delivery." Korbo sighed. "We tried to correct the situation, but I guess we were too late."

"It wasn't hard to figure out that your girl was clipping coupons," Joe said with some severity.

"You are very astute. So much so that I won't equivocate nor beat around the bush."

"It wouldn't do much good," Joe said, wondering what *equivocate* meant.

"Of course not. We're here to take over your planet, Mr. King."

"I thought there was something

fishy — " Joe gulped. "*What?*"

"Your surprise is quite natural. You will be forced to visualize quite rapidly in order to catch up with things as they are."

"You can never get away with it."

Korbo smiled impersonally. "An admirable animal reaction. Instinctive defiance even before you understand the problem involved — and the hopelessness of your decision. Let me explain the situation."

Korbo was interrupted by the entrance of the middle-aged, blonde man. The latter wore a pair of ear phones and a worried expression. He shook his head in the negative and Korbo pursed his lips reflectively. "Interesting," Korbo said, then picked up where he left off. "Let me explain the situation. We are from another planet, Mr. King. Its name and location is of no great importance to you, nor how we got here. Our presence is proof of my statements — "

"You're nuts!" Joe King said. "It's some kind of a racket. If you came from some other planet, you'd be a — "

"A freak? That's a popular misconception, nurtured no doubt by the fiction writers of your world. When we arrived our only problems were to learn your language and customs. That took a little time."

"Okay. Let's both act crazy. I'll take for granted you aren't lying, but you're still out of luck. As soon as the FBI hears about you, they'll wipe you out."

"And you plan to tell them?"

Joe glanced at the machines between which he sat. "Unless you're going to kill me before I can get up and walk out."

Korbo held up a hand. "Don't exert yourself. I'm not going to kill you. My level of development — far higher than yours — makes it impossible for me to assert myself in violence."

"You'll never get away with this," Joe repeated doggedly.

Korbo regarded his guest pensively. "You disappoint me somewhat. Aren't you interested in learning by what method we intend to conquer you — and why we want your planet?"

"Sure. The more you tell me, the more I can tell the FBI."

"An amazing lack of guile," Korbo commented. Then he went on in a narrative tone. "I'll make it as brief and clear as possible, Mr. King. We have chosen, from our technical resources a — well, I suppose you'd call it a secret calculated for non-violent achievement."

Catching Joe's bewilderment, Korbo hastened to add, "The unit is not lethal."

Now the earlier interruption was repeated. The door opened. The middle aged man with the

ear phones again looked in and shook his head.

"Amazing," Mr. Korbo said.

"Who's he?" Joe asked.

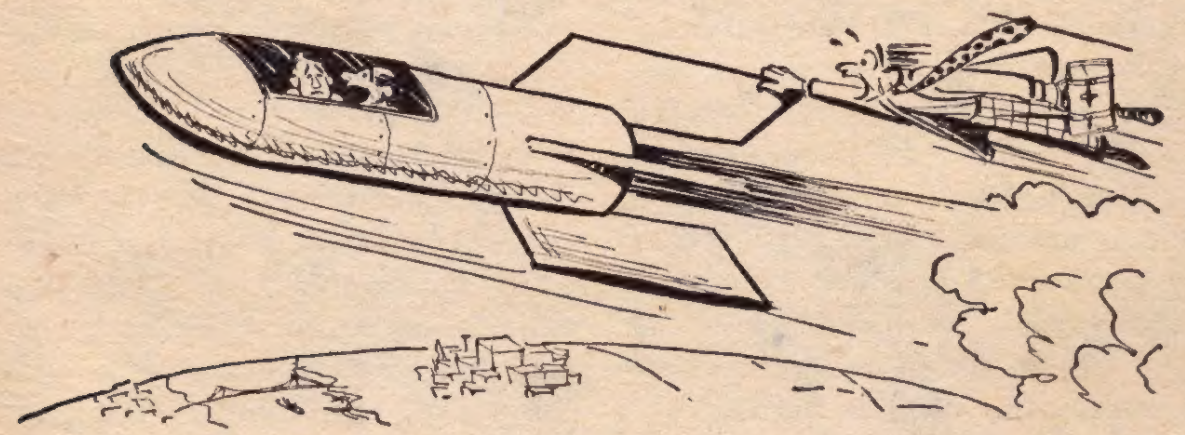
"My associate. Not important. Pay no attention. We have a method, Mr. King, of exacting abject loyalty from your people. Through a highly technical process involving the use of mixed high-frequency waves coupled with mental suggestion, we can cause human beings to become fanatically subservient to any basic ideals and suggestions we care to plant into the roots of their instincts."

Joe had a sudden brain storm. "That's this contraption. You expect me to sit here while you turn it on. You must be really nuts."

"That brings up a curious point. We have discovered that less than one percent of our subjects are immune to the waves. They possess such strong will power, we are unable to break through. You are one of those people, Mr. King. The machine has been functioning for the last hour with absolutely no effect on you."

"I think you're nuts," Joe said.

"Possibly; but now I can only attempt to persuade you to join us. Consider the situation. We have progressed further than you know. So far, in fact, that success is assured. We have many machines such as this functioning in many places. Our converts make



"Jones didn't show. Think he got cold feet?"

other converts, so to speak. In the end, the die-hards must conform or be eliminated. If you come in of your own free will, there will be a high place for you in our organization."

"You think you can talk me out of going to the FBI?" Joe asked with belligerence.

"I hope to," Korbo said gently. "Persuasion is the only weapon I have left."

"It won't work. You and your bunch are cooked."

"Very well, but at least do this. Go home and think it over. I'll have Adams drive you home. Give what I've said careful consideration. Then, if you are still adamant — " Korbo shrugged.

Joe King's native cunning came to his rescue. These people were on the level. He had to get out of this place some way. They were playing for big stakes and they'd knock him off like a fly. It stood to reason. But if he could get clear —

Joe smiled. "I guess that's fair enough. I'm not saying I'll go along with you, but I'll think it over. After all, the thing's pretty big. And it hit me all of a sudden."

Korbo smiled also. "Fine." As if by signal, the blonde man again entered the room — minus the ear phones this time. He looked at Joe with marked respect. Korbo said: "Mr. King is going home. I'd like to have you drive him." Korbo turned and fairly beamed at Joe. "Courtesy of the house."

Joe said, "Thanks." All he had to do was get to a phone and these jerks were sunk.

Half an hour later, Joe was peaking through his own window watching the blonde man make a U-turn and drive back the way he'd come. As the car disappeared, Joe turned in triumph to Marcia, who questioned with her eyes. "I told you they were phonys," Joe said. "They're more than that. They're dangerous. They plan to take us over."

"What are you going to do?"

Joe glanced up in surprise as he walked toward the phone. "Do? I'm going to yell copper! What would anybody do?" He picked up the instrument.

"Put it down, Joe."

"Marcia!"

He whirled to see Marcia staring at him through glazed eyes; eyes in a face filled with agony. "What the hell!"

"Put it down."

"Marcia: You're crazy! I'm calling the FBI!"

Marcia brought a small gun from behind her back. The pain and agony in her face increased and tears filled her eyes as she shot him, carefully, three times through the head.

When the police and the photographers came, she managed to look properly distraught and disheveled.

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